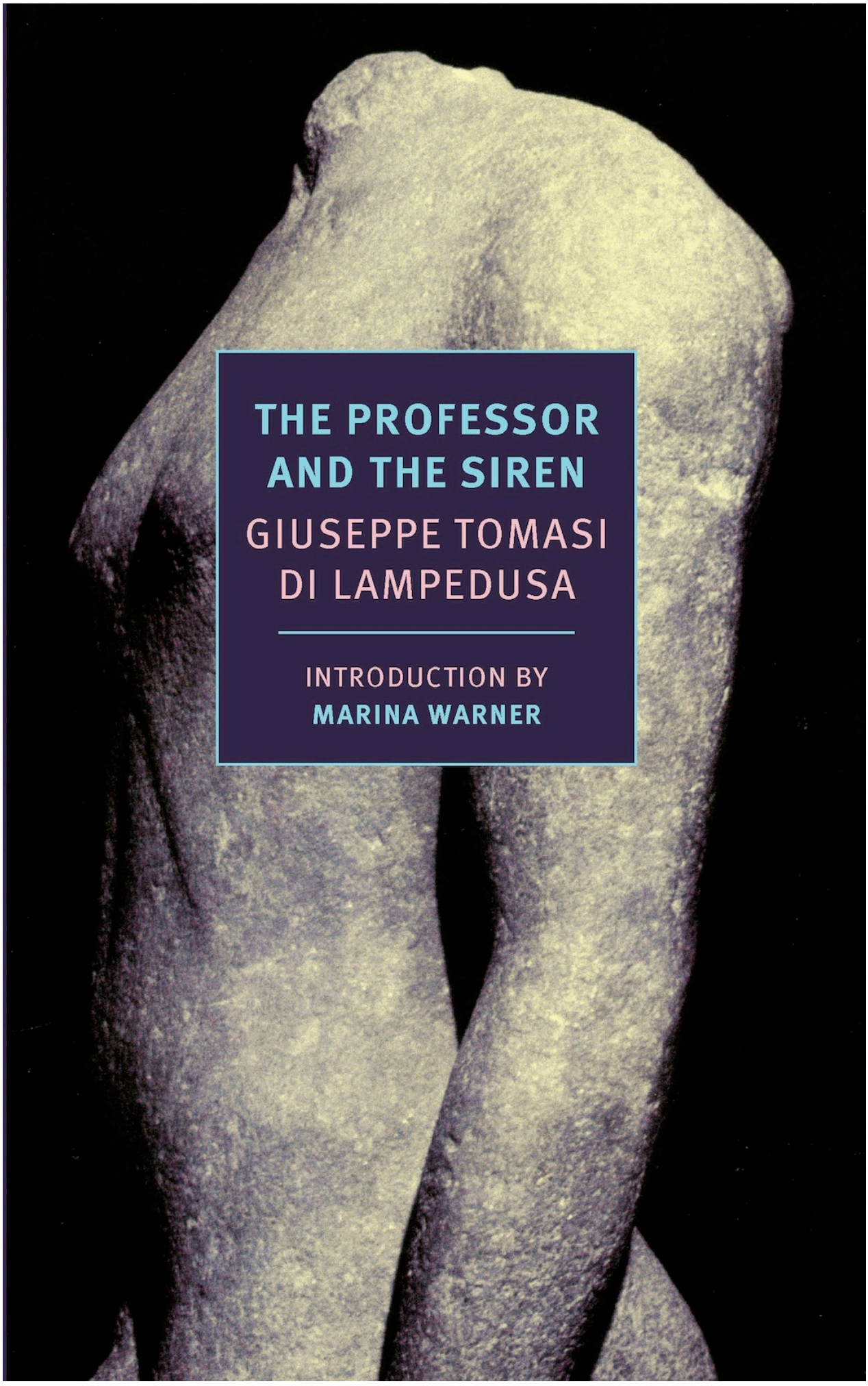
THE PROFESSOR AND THE SIREN
GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA
INTRODUCTION BY
MARINA WARNER

GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA (1896–1957) was a Sicilian nobleman, the Duke of Palma, and the last Prince of Lampedusa. He was born in Palermo to an aristocratic family whose fortunes began to decline in the 1800s with the passage of laws breaking up large Sicilian estates. Lampedusa served as an Italian artillery officer during World War I and was captured by the Austrians and held briefly in a prison camp in Hungary. He remained in the Italian military until 1921 and spent the interwar years traveling through Europe and attempting to restore the family estate. During World War II, the Tomasi palace in Palermo was bombed and looted by Allied troops. In the last two years of his life, Lampedusa began writing and produced his great historical novel *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*), as well as several short literary works, none of which were published during his lifetime. Two years after Lampedusa's death, The Leopard won the Strega Prize and became a worldwide best seller.

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NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

New York

THIS IS A NEW YORK REVIEW BOOK
PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS
435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014
www.nyrb.com

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The stories in this volume were originally published in Italian in the volume *I racconti*, published in June 1961 by Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, Milan.

Cover image: A kouros, c.570 b.c.; Louvre / B. de Sollier & P. Muxel / The Bridgeman Art Library
Cover design: Katy Homans

The Library of Congress has cataloged the earlier printing as follows:
Tomasi di Lampedusa, Giuseppe, 1896–1957, author.
[Short stories. Selections. English]
The Professor and the Siren / Giuseppe Tomasi Di Lampedusa ; translated by Stephen Twilley ; introduction by Marina Warner.
pages cm. — (New York Review Books Classics)
ISBN 978-1-59017-719-8 (paperback)
I. Twilley, Stephen, translator. II. Title.
PQ4843.O53A2 2014
853'.914—dc23
2013050864
ISBN 978-1-59017-742-6
v1.0

For a complete list of books in the NYRB Classics series, visit www.nyrb.com or write to: Catalog Requests, NYRB, 435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014.

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INTRODUCTION

By the side of the path around the circular, volcanic crater of Lake Pergusa, near the town of Enna in the center of Sicily, a carved stone marks the spot where Proserpina, the goddess of the spring, was seized and carried off by Pluto into the underworld. "*Qui, in questo luogo*," proclaims the inscription. "*Proserpina fù rapita.*" This is the very place:

> ...that fair field
> Of Enna, where Proserpin gath'ring flow'rs
> Herself a fairer Flow'r by gloomy Dis
> Was gather'd, which cost Ceres all that pain
> To seek her through the world.
>
> (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV)

I was giving a lecture in Palermo in 2011 and asked to see the entrance to Hades. My hosts from the university kindly drove me; it was early summer, the lush undergrowth was starred with flowers, and the tapestry of orchids, campion, arum, acanthus, clover, wild hyacinth, thyme, and marjoram was still green tender and damp. Next to the monument I found another sign, which pointed beyond the chain-link fence toward "the cave from which the god issued forth in his chariot." Again, the use of the past historic declared the event's definite reality. In a tangle of bushes and fruit trees, some rocks were visible, but the mouth opening on the infernal regions now stands in private grounds.

Ovid tells us, in his *Metamorphoses*, that the young girls who were gathering flowers with Proserpina that fatal day were turned into the Sirens—the bird-bodied golden-feathered singers with female faces of the Homeric tradition—and then went wandering about over land and sea, crying out in search of their vanished playmate. In "The Professor and the Siren," Giuseppe Tomasi, Prince of Lampedusa, picks up these echoes when he evokes a passionate love affair unfolding by the sea in the ferocious heat of the dog days in 1887. However, in this late story, which was written in January 1957, a few months before his death, Lampedusa gives his immortal heroine the body of a fish from the waist down; in this he is following the more familiar northern folklore tradition of fish-tailed mermaids; of Mélusine, seal women or selkies; and of water spirits, called undines by the alchemist and philosopher Paracelsus. But both species share the special charm of an irresistible voice. In the case of Lampedusa's mermaid, hers is "a bit guttural, husky, resounding with countless harmonics; behind the words could be discerned the sluggish undertow of summer seas, the whisper of receding beach foam, the wind passing over lunar tides. The song of the Sirens...does not exist; the music that cannot be escaped is their voice alone."

"The Professor and the Siren" is the only instance of fantastic fiction in Lampedusa's scanty oeuvre, but enigmatic and brief as it is, it condenses many elements from both local and more distant folklore into a deeply strange, sometimes disturbing fable; in the manner of Giovanni Boccaccio and of *The Thousand and One Nights*, the tale encloses a visionary and magical adventure inside a naturalistic, quotidian frame story. In the outer frame, Paolo Corbera, a young journalist living a bit on the wild side, who comes from the same aristocratic Sicilian family—the Salina—as Don Fabrizio, the hero of Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*, meets an aged fellow countryman in a dingy café in Turin in 1938. He discovers the old man is a renowned classicist and senator, Rosario La Ciura, a waspish misanthrope who is contemptuous of everything and everyone around him in the modern world. But the younger man is attracted by a quality of mystery and yearning beneath the spiky persona and grows attached to him; the feeling is mutual, though La Ciura does not let up on his withering remarks, bitter denunciations of contemporary society, and mockery of the imagined squalor of his young friend's promiscuous adventures. Then one evening over dinner at his house, on the eve of a sea voyage to a conference in Lisbon, La Ciura confides in Paolo the story of his first and only experience of love.

In that torrid summer of 1887, La Ciura tells Paolo, he retreated to a shack by the sea on the magnificent wild shore on the eastern side of Sicily, near the port of Augusta. One day, while he lay studying in a gently rocking boat in order to escape the ferocious heat on land, he felt the craft dip: "I turned and saw her: The smooth face of a sixteen-year-old emerged from the sea; two small hands gripped the gunwale. The adolescent smiled, a slight displacement of her pale lips that revealed small, sharp white teeth, like dogs'." He pulls her into the boat and sees her lower body: "She was a Siren."

A recording exists of Lampedusa reading the story, and at this moment on the tape, his rapid, witty rendering comes to a pause with a slight intake of breath, a sigh that reveals the author's awe before the

intense presence of his own creation.

The Siren announces herself: She is "Lighea, daughter of Calliope," a name that lays a clue to the story's deeper meaning, for Calliope is the Muse of epic poetry who, in the *Metamorphoses*, tells the story of Proserpina, her abduction, and the transformation of her handmaidens. Through this account of her daughter's irruption into La Ciura's life, the overwhelming epiphany he undergoes through her love, and its lifelong aftershock, Lampedusa is placing himself as the heir of an imaginative literary legacy running back to the pagan past, when Christian repression and hypocrisy did not exercise their hold but instead life was bathed in a luminous intensity and heightened by guilt-free passion.

While the name Lighea (the original title of the story in Italian) echoes the heroine of Edgar Allan Poe's early tale of erotic haunting "Ligeia," the coincidence is not altogether helpful; La Ciura has remained spellbound all his life by his youthful love, but Lampedusa's story does not raise uncanny specters or relish sickly memories. The Sicilian is writing against the morbid obsession of Poe; the passion at the core of his modern mythology conjures the possibility of an earthy, pastoral ecstasy, much closer to Dionysian erotica and its legacy (Mallarmé's "*L'Après-midi d'un faune"*) than to creepy high Gothic; animality recurs in the tale as an ideal. In a startling passage, La Ciura even compares the bliss he experienced with his mermaid to Sicilian goatherds coupling with their animals.

Il Gattopardo (*The Leopard*), Lampedusa's only novel, a Stendhalian historical reconstruction of Sicilian society in the tumult of the Garibaldian revolution, is one of those books that has such vivid energy of imagination it has replaced Sicilian reality in the minds of thousands. The book unfurls a fabric of luxuriantly worked detail, as encrusted and sumptuous as one of the island's embroidered mantles of the Madonna, and its worldwide success with readers arose partly from this sensuous plenitude: Lampedusa piles on pleasurable, heady effects, as in the celebrated ball scene when he parades profiteroles, succulent Babas, and irresistible "Virgins' cakes." "The Professor and the Siren" likewise stimulates each of the senses—we are invited to smell and taste the siren, not just to see or touch her. The erotic avidity of the eminent, scornful professor startles his young friend, Paolo, just as it can take the reader by surprise, too. The old man wants to eat sea urchins:

> "...they are the most beautiful thing you have down there, bloody and cartilaginous, the very image of the female sex, fragrant with salt and seaweed. Typhus, typhus! They're dangerous as all gifts from the sea are; the sea offers death as well as immortality. In Syracuse I demanded that Orsi order them immediately. What flavor! How divine in appearance! My most beautiful memory of the last fifty years!"
>
> I was confused and fascinated: a man of such stature indulging in almost obscene metaphors, displaying an infantile appetite for the altogether mediocre pleasure of eating sea urchins!

Later, Paolo brings La Ciura some very fresh ones for supper and watches him eat them:

> The urchins, split in half, revealed their wounded, blood-red, strangely compartmentalized flesh. I'd never paid attention before now, but after the senator's bizarre comparisons they really did seem like cross sections of who knows what delicate female organs. He consumed them avidly but without cheer, with a meditative, almost sorrowful air.

The effect is a bit queasy, a collision of refinement with explicit fleshly delights. Earlier, La Ciura has quoted the opening line of Shakespeare's Sonnet 119: "What potions have I drunk of Siren tears?"

At this point in the recording, after Lampedusa has delivered the line in exquisitely articulated English, he sounds so moved that he can hardly recover himself to continue. The original sonnet, however, continues in a dark Jacobean spirit, that these tears have been "Distilled from limbecks foul as hell within." The reader may not carry libraries in his head like the author, but turning back to Shakespeare will find that the poet, overborne by "this madding fever" of his love, cries out against the clash between beauty and ugliness, desire and repulsion. La Ciura, idealizing a memory of bliss with one exceptional lover, while furiously denouncing all other women as sluts or worse, recalls Lear who in his madness rains down curses on women's organs: "Down from the waist they are Centaurs, / Though women all above; / But to the girdle do the gods inherit, / Beneath is all the fiends': there's hell, there's darkness, / There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, / Stench, consumption. Fie, fie, fie! pah, pah!" (*King Lear*, IV, 6)

In Shakespeare's imagination, the centaurs that Lear excoriates are—like mermaids, monsters, mythic hybrids of animal and human parts—close to nature and its bounty and violence, and brimful of classical associations with untamed passions. But La Ciura is taking issue with this dichotomy and its freight of sin and disgust. He declares, "I told you before, Corbera: She was a beast and at the same time an Immortal,

and it's a shame that we cannot continuously express this synthesis in speaking, the way she does, with absolute simplicity, in her own body."

Lighea's marvelous duality is reflected throughout the story. The old man and his young friend—the one celibate, the other libidinous—dramatize the traditional Greek antimony between reason and desire, the civilized and the wild. Yet, as with the mermaid's form, Lampedusa aims to fashion a *coincidentia oppositorum* at many levels—supernatural and natural, unreal and material, monstrosity and beauty, animal and human, ideal love and lubricious delight—arraying his love story in language that's enriched by his famously wide reading across the spectrum of genres, including Calliope's sphere, epic poetry: The imagery of his siren's peculiar anatomy owes something to Keats's Lamia, as well as to Homer's Scylla. With judicious wit, Lampedusa corrects misapprehensions among his forebears; for example, in canto XIX of *Purgatorio*, a passage familiar to Italian readers, Dante describes a dream of an ambiguous siren, beautiful and grotesque, and remembers how he woke sharply at the stench from her exposed belly. This is the sort of puritanical horror that Lampedusa rejects utterly. When La Ciura evokes the delicious aroma of his siren, he is pointedly redressing the wrong done to the species. Above all, La Ciura's heroine declares, "Don't believe the stories about us. We don't kill anyone, we only love."

The story conveys far more than a sultry passion of summer days long ago; it has radiated throughout the aged professor's life as an ideal of transcendent unity, body and soul, carnal and spiritual knowledge, and he passes it on to his young confidant to initiate him, too, into a pagan mystery about a form of passion to which modernity—and Christianity—has blocked access. With his sun-drenched, aromatic summons of an erotic idyll with a beast who was also a goddess, La Ciura—and his creator, Lampedusa—expresses a dreamed healing of these long, deep conflicts. The frequent references to Hades in relation to the Turin bar where Paolo first meets La Ciura strike the reader as jocular at first, but after hearing the story of his dazzling encounter with the divine, the darkness takes on a powerful metaphorical charge. With the closing pages of his story, when the professor keeps his tryst with the siren, Lampedusa folds together Eros and Thanatos to reach a consummation of surprising serenity. In this way, the author defends mermaids against centuries of fairy lore that warns against their malignant and fatal love.

The figure of the rather feckless narrator reflects the young Lampedusa himself, who attended—rather briefly —the university in Turin, and also stayed with friends in the city for longer periods in the early part of the century. Turin was a center of political discussion and, eventually, of strong resistance to Fascism, and readers of Lampedusa's story take La Ciura's ferocious contempt for the tawdriness of the modern world as an attack on the Mussolini regime: a great scholar denouncing the denatured uses of the classics by the architects and artists serving Fascist propaganda. Lampedusa had felt admiration for Mussolini in the early years of the dictatorship (his sympathies were not unusual among intellectuals in Italy, including his fellow countryman Pirandello), but in 1938, the year in which he set "The Professor and the Siren," the new "racial laws" were passed, and Lampedusa and his wife decisively parted company with the regime.

The figure of La Ciura, however, represents radical independence from the claims of the present—his aloofness and misanthropy exclude any direct political engagement one way or another. He originates in some fascinating compatriots of Lampedusa, whose stories continue the writer's excavations into his island. For example, La Ciura was partly influenced by the scholar Giulio Emanuele Rizzo, a classical archaeologist, born in Syracuse, who published a study of the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii, the most sumptuous and enigmatic sequence of erotic paintings surviving from ancient Rome. More significant still, however, is that La Ciura's disappearance at the end of the story was directly inspired by another eminent Sicilian, Ettore Majorana, a particle physicist and mathematician of lasting influence, who was born in Catania in 1906 and vanished on a sea voyage from Palermo to Naples in 1938. The circumstances have remained a mystery, but there were reported sightings in Argentina of someone who looked very like him. For Lampedusa, the likely political reasons, the detective-story elements, and the particular troubled psychology of Majorana are all set aside, or rather transmuted—exalted—into a mythic passage into the transcendent: first experienced as love, like Odysseus's sojourn with Callisto, and then as katabasis, descending to the depths to be reunited with his siren who promised long ago she would always be there to receive him.

Through the scathing fury of La Ciura and his hankering for the past and for his fairy love, Lampedusa presents an allegory of his passion for Sicily; the mermaid embodies the island's deep time and her spell the ecstasy and the wound that its mad beauty inflicts, and even her materiality conveys the burden of its antiquity, its long history. In his distaste, his hauteur and cynicism, the cynical, angry old man resembles Don Fabrizio, the Prince of Salina and the hero of *The Leopard*. But even more than the imposing, tall, powerful, agile prince, the complex character of La Ciura conveys Lampedusa himself: reclusive, bookish, and determinedly out of sorts with the times.

Yet the “professor” is also rather different from both the fictive Prince of Salina and the real-life Prince of Lampedusa: The once handsome student isn’t a decadent aristocrat mired in the stagnant idleness engulfing an entire society but a productive, hardworking, world-renowned scholar who has risen from obscure social rank; his universe is larger than the enervated and stifling island society that the other two stories in this volume depict. Furthermore, as the often startling sensuality of the story makes clear, La Ciura has strong appetites and is able to remember an experience that lifts him out of the general depressive tenor of Lampedusa’s world.

The unusual departure for Lampedusa into mythic territory reveals the versatility of a passionate reader and book-lover who had not yet settled into one mode or decided his genre. But he had found his theme, whatever kind of story he chose to write, and that was Sicily, its history, customs, landscapes, and people.

The manuscript of *The Leopard* was almost lost but finally assembled from scattered pieces, and the work was acclaimed a masterpiece as soon as it saw the light of day in 1958—but by then its author was dead at sixty. The manuscript of “Lighea” has not been traced; the story exists only in a typed copy. In his own eyes, Lampedusa died unpublished, a dilettante and a failure, just one of the many absurd and immobilized aristocrats he satirized, as in “The Blind Kittens”; yet this odd stroke of fate in his peculiar history sharpens the melancholy power of his slender oeuvre. “The Professor and the Siren,” the last thing he wrote, feels even more autobiographical once the reader knows that Lampedusa was about to die when he was writing it.

The two other stories included here, “Joy and the Law” and “The Blind Kittens,” reveal an author who loved nineteenth-century novels and short stories from the French and English traditions (Flaubert, Maupassant, Dickens), and liked to spend the evenings reading aloud with friends. But “The Professor and the Siren” springs from the popular lore of the island and its legacy of myth rather than its social mores or disastrous politics. The map of his native place offered Lampedusa a richly pictured mappamundi of imaginary histories: the streams, bays, mountains, promontories, lakes, and plains that carry the names of nymphs and monsters, deities and giants, and have continued to inspire writers in the long afterlife of Greek antiquity in Italy and beyond. Italo Calvino was compiling the key anthology *Italian Folktales* contemporaneously (it came out in 1956), and in his introduction he singles out, for their liveliness and invention, the stories of Agatuzza Messia, an illiterate seamstress of Messina, who had been the nurse of a Palermitan doctor, Giuseppe Pitrè. Pitrè turned himself into a pioneering ethnographer, equipping his carriage with a desk and writing materials so he could record his patients’ stories; several relate encounters with beings from other worlds, including palaces under the sea. In *Beautiful Angiola*, Laura Gonzenbach, the daughter of the Swiss consul in Messina, another busy collector of local fairy tales, includes one called “La Fata Morgana” after King Arthur’s sea-fairy sister who lives in the straits of Messina (north of Augusta where Lampedusa sets his tale) and rises from the depths to seduce her mortal lovers.

Lampedusa’s interest in mythic territory might also owe something to his wife, Alessandra (Licy) Wolff, a Baltic aristocrat and pioneering psychoanalyst who knew half a dozen languages, including Russian and Latvian, and the traditional folklore of their cultures. “The Professor and the Siren” also adopts the symbolic, Freudian language of enchantment far more than the two other stories in this volume, which continue in Lampedusa’s vein of ironic, bitter-comic, social observations.

But the fairy imagery depends even more directly on the work of Lampedusa’s much-loved cousins, Lucio and Casimiro Piccolo di Calanovella. Giuseppe would stay with them for long periods in their beautiful, verdant villa by the sea at Capo d’Orlando, especially after the family palazzo in Palermo was bombed in 1943 and pretty much destroyed. All their lives, the cousins used to read aloud to one another; this custom led to the happy chance that, when Lampedusa’s adopted son and heir, Gioacchino Lanza di Tomasi, was visiting in February 1957, he recorded the author reading the story on a Grundig tape recorder he had just been given by his girlfriend.

The Piccolos were gifted, celibate, quite exceptionally odd, and the only deep attachments of Giuseppe’s life (apart from his mother, their aunt). Lucio was a poet and in 1954 was awarded a prize for his first collection (the story goes that he sent it to the competition in a parcel without enough stamps) by the *gran maestro* Eugenio Montale. Giuseppe accompanied Lucio to the ceremony, and the occasion, with his obscure cousin celebrated by one of the major literary figures of the day, spurred on Giuseppe to settling down properly to writing the novel *Il Gattopardo*—which he had been dreaming and planning for decades. Lucio and Giuseppe had talked books in several languages since their earliest youth, his poetical cousin championing folklore, fantasy, and poetry. Lucio corresponded with W.B. Yeats, comparing the Celtic twilight fairy folk, the Tuatha Dé Danann, with the local *fate* and sprites; he loved *The Faerie Queene* and liked to recite chunks of it at full throttle. His brother, Casimiro, was even more eccentric (as

if it were possible), an artist who painted elves and phantoms, and pursued spiritualist and occult studies; his art shows how he had looked carefully at the English picture-book tradition, admiring Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac, and John Leech, who illustrated Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." "The Professor and the Siren" salutes these Piccolo cousins, I think, with Lampedusa stepping onto their terrain with unexpected vitality, in a fit of the festive communicativeness that affection for them allowed him to express.

Lampedusa is the name of a small rocky island in the southern Mediterranean, one of many in the constellation scattered across the Mediterranean around Sicily, and is the nearest Italian territory to Africa. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa never set foot on his principality. In a strange coda to his story, this islet has now become a familiar feature in the news, for it is the landing place of thousands of migrants trying to make their way—sometimes by swimming—into Europe. The mayor and citizens of the island, in a spirit of openness and adaptation, have taken it upon themselves to create a different society there in their encounter with the visitants from the sea. Lampedusa is often quoted for his cynicism about change: "If things are to remain as they are, everything has to change," says Tancredi in *The Leopard.* But it is possible, if the island of Lampedusa is today becoming an arena for fruitful social experiment in coexistence between north and south, that this famous adage can be taken in a different spirit. In the novel—as in the story about the professor—the prince encounters the unforeseen and, despite himself and all his ironical hauteur, finds riches in the transformation he undergoes.

—Marina Warner,
Kentish Town, 2014

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THE PROFESSOR AND THE SIREN

Late in the autumn of 1938 I came down with a severe case of misanthropy. I was living in Turin at the time, and my local girl no. 1, rifling my pockets in search of a spare fifty-lire note as I slept, had also discovered a short letter from girl no. 2. Spelling mistakes notwithstanding, it left no room for doubt concerning the nature of our relations.

My waking was both immediate and violent. Outbursts of angry dialect echoed through my modest lodgings on Via Peyron, and an attempt to scratch my eyes out was averted only by the slight twist I administered to the dear girl's left wrist. This entirely justified act of self-defense put an end to the row, but also to the romance. The girl dressed hurriedly, stuffing powder puff, lipstick, and a little handkerchief into her bag along with the fifty-lire note, "cause of so great a calamity," thrice flung a colorful local alternative to "Swine!" in my face, and left. Never had she been so adorable as in those fifteen minutes of fury. I watched from the window as she emerged and moved away into the morning mist: tall, slender, adorned with regained elegance.

I never saw her again, just as I never saw a black cashmere sweater that had cost me a small fortune and possessed the woeful merit of being cut to suit a woman just as well as a man. All she left were two of those so-called invisible hairpins on the bed.

That same afternoon I had an appointment with no. 2 in a patisserie in Piazza Carlo Felice. At the little round table in the western corner of the second room—"our" table—I saw not the chestnut tresses of the girl whom I now desired more than ever but the sly face of Tonino, her twelve-year-old brother. He'd just gulped down some hot chocolate with a double portion of whipped cream. With typical Turinese urbanity, he stood as I approached.

"Sir," he said, "Pinotta will not be coming; she asked me to give you this note. Good day, sir."

He went out, taking with him the two brioches left on his plate. The ivory-colored card announced that I was summarily dismissed on account of my infamy and "southern dishonesty." Clearly, no. 1 had tracked down and provoked no. 2, and I had fallen between two stools.

In twelve hours I had lost two usefully complementary girls plus a sweater to which I was rather attached; I also had to pick up the check for that infernal Tonino. I'd been made a fool of, humiliated in my very Sicilian self-regard; and I decided to abandon for a time the world and its pomps.

There was no better place for this period of retreat than the café on Via Po where, lonely as a dog, I now went at every free moment, and always in the evening after my work at the newspaper. It was a sort of Hades filled with the wan shades of lieutenant colonels, magistrates, and retired professors. These vain apparitions played checkers or dominoes, submerged in a light that was dimmed during the day by the clouds and the arcade outside, during the evenings by the enormous green shades on the chandeliers. They never raised their voices, afraid that any immoderate sound might upset the fragile fabric of their presence. It was, in short, a most satisfactory Limbo.

Being a creature of habit, I always sat at the same little corner table, one carefully designed to provide maximum discomfort to the customer. On my left two spectral senior officers played trictrac with two phantoms from the appeals court; their military and judicial dice slipped tonelessly from a leather cup. On my right sat an elderly man wrapped in an old overcoat with a worn astrakhan collar. He read foreign magazines one after another, smoked Tuscan cigars, and frequently spat. Every so often he would close his magazine and appear to be pursuing some memory in the spirals of smoke; then he would go back to reading and spitting. His hands were as ugly as could be, gnarled and ruddy, with fingernails that were cut straight across and not always clean. Once, however, when he came across a photograph in a magazine of an archaic Greek statue, the kind with widespread eyes and an ambiguous smile, I was surprised to see his disfigured fingertips caress the image with positively regal delicacy. When he realized that I'd seen him, he grunted with displeasure and ordered a second espresso.

Our relations would have remained on this plane of latent hostility if not for a happy accident. Usually I left the office with five or six daily papers, including, on one occasion, the *Giornale di Sicilia*. Those were the years when the Fascist Ministry of Popular Culture, or MinCulPop, was at its most virulent, and every newspaper was just like all the others; that edition of the Palermo daily was as banal as ever, indistinguishable from a paper published in Milan or Rome, if not by its greater share of typographical errors. My reading of it was accordingly brief, and I soon set it aside on the table. I had already begun to contemplate another product of MinCulPop's vigilance when my neighbor addressed me: "Pardon me, sir,

would you mind if I glanced at this *Giornale di Sicilia* of yours? I'm Sicilian, and it's been twenty years since I came across a newspaper from my part of the world." His voice was as cultivated as any I'd ever heard, the accent impeccable; his gray eyes regarded me with profound indifference.

"Be my guest. I'm Sicilian myself, you know. If you like, I can easily bring the paper every evening."

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary; my curiosity is a purely physical one. If Sicily remains as it was in my time, I imagine nothing good ever happens there. Nothing has for the past three thousand years."

He glanced through the paper, folded it, and gave it back to me, then plunged into reading a pamphlet. When he stood to go, it was clear that he hoped to slip out unnoticed, but I rose to introduce myself; he quietly muttered his name, which I failed to catch, yet neglected to extend his hand. At the threshold of the café, however, he turned, doffed his hat, and loudly shouted, "Farewell, fellow countryman." He disappeared down the arcade, leaving me speechless while the shades at their games grumbled disapprovingly.

I performed the magical rites necessary to conjure a waiter; pointing at the empty table, I asked him, "Who was that gentleman?"

"That," he replied, "is Senator Rosario La Ciura."

The name said a great deal even to an ignorant journalist. It belonged to one of the five or six Italians with an indisputable international reputation—to the most illustrious Hellenist of our time, in fact. I understood the thick magazines and the caressing of the illustration, the unsociability and hidden refinement, too.

In the newspaper offices the following day I searched through that peculiar drawer of the obituary file containing the "advancers." The "La Ciura" card was there, for once tolerably well drafted. I read how the great man had been born into an impoverished petit bourgeois family in Aci Castello (Catania), and that thanks to an astonishing aptitude for ancient Greek, and by dint of scholarships and scholarly publications, he had at the age of twenty-seven attained the chair of Greek literature at the University of Pavia. Subsequently he had moved to the University of Turin, where he remained until retirement. He had taught at Oxford and Tübingen and traveled extensively, for not only had he been a senator since before the Fascists came to power and a member of the Lincean Academy; he had also received honorary degrees from Yale, Harvard, New Delhi, and Tokyo, as well as, of course, from the most prestigious European universities from Uppsala to Salamanca. His lengthy list of publications included many that were considered fundamental, especially those on Ionic dialects; suffice to say that he had been commissioned to edit the Hesiod volume in the Bibliotheca Teubneriana, the first foreigner so honored, to which he had added an introduction in Latin of unsurpassed scientific rigor and profundity. Finally, the greatest honor of all, he was *not* a member of the Fascist Royal Academy of Italy. What had always set him apart from other exceedingly erudite colleagues was a vital, almost carnal sense of classical antiquity, a quality on display in a collection of essays written in Italian, *Men and Gods*, which had been recognized as a work not only of great erudition but of authentic poetry. He was, in short, "an honor to a nation and a beacon to the world," as the card concluded. He was seventy-five years old and lived decorously but far from lavishly on his pension and senator's benefits. He was a bachelor.

There's no use denying that we Italians—original sons (or fathers) of the Renaissance—look on the Great Humanist as superior to all other human beings. The possibility of finding myself in daily proximity to the highest representative of such subtle, almost magical, and poorly remunerated wisdom was both flattering and disturbing. I experienced the same sensations that a young American would on meeting Mr. Gillette: fear, respect, a certain not ignoble envy.

That evening I descended into Limbo in quite a different spirit than that of the previous days. The senator was already at his spot and responded to my reverential greeting with a faint grumble. When, however, he'd finished reading an article and jotted down a few things in a small notebook, he turned toward me and, in a strangely musical voice, said, "Fellow countryman, from the manner in which you greeted me I gather that one of these phantoms has told you who I am. Forget it, and, if you haven't already done so, forget the aorist tense you studied in secondary school. Instead tell me your name, because your introduction yesterday evening was the usual mumbled mess and I, unlike you, do not have the option of learning who you are from others. Because it's clear that no one here knows you."

He spoke with insolent detachment. To him I was apparently something less than a cockroach, more like a dust mote whirling aimlessly in a sunbeam. And yet the calm voice, precise speech, and use of the familiar *tu* radiated the serenity of a Platonic dialogue.

"My name is Paolo Corbera. I was born in Palermo, where I also took my law degree. Now I work here for *La Stampa*. To reassure you, Senator, let me add that on my exit exams I earned a '5 plus' out of 10 in

Greek, and I suspect that the 'plus' was only added to make sure I received my diploma."

He gave a half smile. "Thank you for telling me this. So much the better. I detest speaking with people who think they know what they in fact do not, like my colleagues at the university. In the end they are familiar only with the external forms of Greek, its eccentricities and deformities. The living spirit of this language, foolishly called 'dead,' has not been revealed to them. *Nothing* has been revealed to them, for that matter. They are poor wretches, after all: How could they perceive this spirit without ever having had the opportunity to hear Greek?"

Pride is fine, sure, it's better than false modesty, but it seemed to me the senator was going too far. I even wondered whether the years might have succeeded in softening somewhat his exceptional mind. Those poor things, his colleagues, had had just as much opportunity to hear ancient Greek as he had—that is, none.

He went on: "Paolo, you're lucky to bear the name of the one apostle who had a bit of culture and a smattering of reading under his belt. Though Jerome would have been better. The other names you Christians carry around are truly contemptible. The names of slaves."

I was disappointed again. He really seemed like nothing more than a typical anticlerical academic with a pinch of Fascist Nietzscheism thrown in. Could it be?

His voice rose and fell appealingly as he continued to speak, with the ardor, perhaps, of someone who had passed a great deal of time in silence. "Corbera...Is that not one of the great names of Sicily, or am I mistaken? I remember that my father paid the annual rent for our house in Aci Castello to the administrator of a House of Corbera di Palina, or Salina, I can't recall which. He'd always joke and say that if there was one thing that was certain in this world, it was that those few lire weren't going to end up in the pockets of the 'demesne,' as he called it. But are you one of those Corberas, or just a descendant of some peasant who took his master's name?"

I confessed that I really was a Corbera di Salina, the sole surviving specimen, in fact. All the opulence, all the sins, all the uncollected rents, all the unpaid debts, all the political opportunism of the Leopard were concentrated in me alone. Paradoxically, the senator seemed pleased.

"That's fine, just fine. I have a great deal of respect for the old families. Their memory is...miniscule, of course, but still it's greater than the others'. It's as much of physical immortality as your sort can hope for. Think about getting married soon, Corbera, seeing as how your sort haven't found any better way to survive than scattering your seed in the strangest places."

He was definitely trying my patience. "Your sort." Who was that? The whole contemptible herd that was not fortunate enough to be Senator La Ciura? Who'd attained physical immortality? You'd never know it from looking at his wrinkled face, his sagging flesh...

"Corbera di Salina," he continued, undeterred, "You don't mind if I call you *tu*, as I do with my students in their fleeting youth?"

I professed to be not only honored but delighted, and I was. Moving beyond questions of names and protocol, we now spoke of Sicily. It had been twenty years since he'd set foot on the island, and the last time he'd been "down there," as he called it in the Piedmontese manner, he'd stayed a mere five days, in Syracuse, to talk to Paolo Orsi about the alternating choruses in classical theater.

"I remember they wanted to take me in a car from Catania to Syracuse; I accepted only when I learned that at Augusta the road passes far from the sea, whereas the train follows the coastline. Tell me about our island. It's a beautiful place, even if it is inhabited by donkeys. The gods once sojourned there—and perhaps in some endless Augusts they return. But don't on any account speak to me about those four modern temples of yours, not that that's anything you'd understand, I'm sure."

So we spoke about eternal Sicily, the Sicily of the natural world; about the scent of rosemary on the Nebrodi Mountains and the taste of Melilli honey; about the swaying cornfields seen from Etna on a windy day in May, some secluded spots near Syracuse, and the fragrant gusts from the citrus plantations known to sweep down on Palermo during sunset in June. We spoke of those magic summer nights, looking out over the gulf of Castellammare, when the stars are mirrored in the sleeping sea, and how, lying on your back among the mastic trees, your spirit is lost in the whirling heavens, while the body braces itself, fearing the approach of demons.

The senator had scarcely visited the island for fifty years, and yet his memory of certain minute details was remarkably precise. "Sicily's sea is the most vividly colored, the most romantic of any I have ever seen; it's the only thing you won't manage to ruin, at least away from the cities. Do the trattorias by the sea still serve spiny urchins, split in half?"

I assured him that they did, though adding that few people ate them now, for fear of typhus.

"And yet they are the most beautiful thing you have down there, bloody and cartilaginous, the very image of the female sex, fragrant with salt and seaweed. Typhus, typhus! They're dangerous as all gifts

from the sea are; the sea offers death as well as immortality. In Syracuse I demanded that Orsi order them immediately. What flavor! How divine in appearance! My most beautiful memory of the last fifty years!"

I was confused and fascinated: a man of such stature indulging in almost obscene metaphors, displaying an infantile appetite for the altogether mediocre pleasure of eating sea urchins!

Our conversation stretched out, and on leaving he insisted on paying for my espresso, not without a display of his peculiar coarseness ("Everyone knows kids from good families are always broke"). We parted friends, if you disregard the fifty-year difference between our ages and the thousands of light years separating our cultures.

We proceeded to see each other every evening; even as my rage against humanity began to wane, I made it my duty never to fail to meet the senator in the underworld of Via Po. Not that we chatted much; he continued to read and take notes and only addressed me occasionally, but when he spoke it was always a melodious flow of pride and insolence, sprinkled with disparate allusions and strands of impenetrable poetry. He continued to spit as well, and eventually I observed that he did so only while he read. I believe that he also developed a certain affection for me, but I didn't delude myself. If there was affection it wasn't anything like what one of "our sort" (to adopt the senator's term) might feel for a human being; instead it was similar to what an elderly spinster might feel for her pet goldfinch, whose vacuousness and lack of understanding she is well aware of, but whose existence allows her to express aloud regrets in which the creature plays no part; and yet, if the pet were not there, she would suffer a distinct malaise. In fact, I began to notice that when I arrived late the old man's eyes, haughty as ever, were fixed on the entrance.

It took roughly a month for us to pass from topical observations—always highly original but impersonal on his part—to more indelicate subjects, which are after all the only ones that distinguish conversations between friends from those between mere acquaintances. I was the one who took the initiative. His spitting bothered me—it had also bothered the guardians of Hades, who finally brought a very shiny brass spittoon to his spot—such that one evening I dared to inquire why he didn't seek a cure for his chronic catarrh. I asked the question without thinking and immediately regretted risking it, expecting the senatorial ire to bring the stucco work on the ceiling raining down on my head. Instead his richly toned voice replied calmly, "But my dear Corbera, I have no catarrh. You who observe so carefully should have noticed that I never cough before spitting. My spitting is not a sign of sickness but of mental health: I spit out of disgust for the rubbish I happen to be reading. If you took the trouble to examine that contrivance"—(and he gestured at the spittoon)—"you would realize that it contains hardly any saliva and no trace of mucus. My spitting is symbolic and highly cultural; if you don't like it, go back to your native drawing rooms, where people don't spit only because they can't be bothered to be nauseated by anything."

His extraordinary insolence was mitigated solely by his distant gaze; I nevertheless felt the desire to stand up and walk out on him then and there. Fortunately I had the time to reflect that the fault lay in my rashness. I stayed, and the impassive senator immediately passed to counterattack. "And you then, why patronize this Erebus full of shades and, as you say, catarrh sufferers, this locus of failed lives? In Turin there's no shortage of those creatures your sort finds so desirable. A trip to the Castello hotel in Rivoli, or to the baths in Moncalieri, and your squalid aspiration would soon be fulfilled."

I began to laugh at hearing such a cultured mouth offer such precise information about the Turinese demimonde. "But how do you come to know about such places, Senator?"

"I know them, Corbera, I know them. Anyone spending time with politicians or members of the Academic Senate learns this, and nothing more. You will, however, do me the favor of being convinced that the sordid pleasures of your sort have never been stuff for Rosario La Ciura." One could sense that it was true: In the senator's bearing and in his words there was the unmistakable sign of a sexual reserve (as one said in 1938) that had nothing to do with age.

"The truth is, Senator, it was precisely my search for some temporary refuge from the world that first brought me here. I'd had trouble with two of just the sort of women you've so rightfully condemned."

His response was immediate and pitiless. "Betrayed, eh, Corbera? Or was it disease?"

"No, nothing like that. Worse: desertion." And I told him about the ridiculous events of two months earlier. I spoke of them in a light, facetious manner; the ulcer on my self-regard had closed, and anyone but that damned Hellenist would have teased me or possibly even sympathized. But the fearful old man did neither; instead he was indignant.

"This is what happens, Corbera, when wretched and diseased beings couple. What's more, I'd say the same to those two little trollops with respect to you, if I had the revolting misfortune to meet them."

"Diseased, Senator? Both of them were in wonderful shape; you should have seen how they ate when

we dined at Gli Specchi. And as for wretched, no, not at all: Each was a magnificent figure of a young woman, and elegant as well."

The senator hissingly spat his scorn. "Diseased, I said, and made no mistake. In fifty, sixty years, perhaps much sooner, they will die; so they are already now diseased. And wretched as well. Some elegance they've got, composed of trinkets, stolen sweaters, and sweet talk picked up at the movies. Some generosity too, fishing for greasy banknotes in their lover's pockets rather than presenting him, as others do, with pink pearls and branches of coral. This is what happens when one goes in for those little monstrosities with painted faces. And were you all not disgusted—they as much as you, you as much as they—to kiss and cuddle your future carcasses between evil-smelling sheets?"

I replied stupidly, "But Senator, the sheets were always perfectly clean!"

He fumed. "What do the sheets have to do with it? The inevitable cadaver stink came from you. I repeat, how can you consent to carouse with people of their kind, of your kind?"

I, who already had my eyes on an enchanting sometime seamstress, took offense. "It's not as if one can sleep with nothing but Most Serene Highnesses!"

"Who said anything about Most Serene Highnessess? They're bound for the charnel house like the rest. But this isn't something you'd understand, young man, and I was wrong to mention it. It is fated that you and your girlfriends will wade ever further into the noxious swamps of your foul pleasures. There are very few who know better." Gazing up at the ceiling, he began to smile; a ravished expression spread over his face; then he shook my hand and left.

We didn't see each other for three days; on the fourth I received a telephone call in the editorial office. "Is this Signor Corbera? My name is Bettina Carmagnola, I'm Senator La Ciura's housekeeper. He asks me to tell you that he has had a bad cold, and that now he is better and wishes to see you tonight after dinner. Come to 18 Via Bertola at nine, second floor." The call, abruptly interrupted, became unappealable.

The building at 18 Via Bertola was a dilapidated old structure, but the senator's apartment was large and—thanks, I suppose, to the diligence of Bettina—well maintained. In the entrance hall began the parade of books, of those modest-looking, economically bound volumes found in all living libraries; there were thousands of them in the three rooms I crossed. In the fourth sat the senator, wrapped in a very ample camel-hair dressing gown that was smoother and softer than any I'd ever seen. I learned later that the fabric wasn't camel at all but was made from the precious wool of a Peruvian animal, and that the gown was a gift from the Academic Senate of Lima. The senator refrained from rising when I entered but welcomed me with considerable warmth. He was better, completely fine, in fact, and planned to be back in circulation as soon as the bitter cold spell that had descended on Turin in those days had passed. He offered me some resinous Cypriot wine, a gift from the Italian Institute of Athens; some atrocious pink *lokums* from the Archaeological Mission of Ankara; and some more sensible Turinese sweets purchased by the provident Bettina. He was in such good humor that he gave two full-mouth smiles and even went so far as to apologize for his outbursts in Hades.

"I know, Corbera, I know. I was excessive in my words, however restrained—believe me—in my concepts. Don't give it another thought."

I really didn't think about it; indeed I was full of respect for the old man, whom I suspected of being tremendously unhappy notwithstanding his triumphant career. He devoured the revolting *lokums*.

"Sweets, Corbera, ought to be sweet and nothing but. If they have another flavor they are like perverted kisses." He gave large crumbs to Aeacus, a stocky boxer that had entered the room at some point. "This creature, Corbera, for those capable of appreciating him, more closely resembles the Immortals, despite his ugliness, than your little temptresses." He refused to show me his library. "It's all classics, stuff that wouldn't interest someone like you, a moral failure in Greek." But he did lead me around the room we were in, which was his study. There were few books, among which I noted the theater of Tirso de Molina, Fouqué's *Undine*, Giraudoux's play of the same name, and, to my surprise, the works of H.G. Wells; but in compensation, on the walls, were enormous life-size photographs of archaic Greek statues, and not the typical photographs that any of us could procure for ourselves but stupendous reproductions, clearly requested with authority and sent with devotion by museums around the world. They were all there, the magnificent creatures: the Louvre's *Horseman*, the *Seated Goddess* from Taranto that is in Berlin, the *Warrior* from Delphi, one of the *Korai of the Acropolis*, the *Apollo of Piombino*, the *Lapith Woman* and the *Phoebus* from Olympia, the famous *Charioteer*...The room shone with their ecstatic and at the same time ironic smiles, gloried in the calm arrogance of their bearing. "You see, Corbera, perhaps these, if one is so fortunate; the local 'maidens,' no." Above the fireplace, ancient amphorae and craters: Odysseus tied to the mast of his boat, the Sirens casting themselves down onto the rocks in

expiation for having let their prey escape. “Lies, Corbera, the lies of petit bourgeois poets. No one escapes, and even if someone did, the Sirens would never destroy themselves for so little. In any case, how could they die?”

On an end table stood a faded old photograph, simply framed, of a young man around twenty, almost nude, his curly hair disheveled, with a bold expression and features of rare beauty. Perplexed, I stopped myself for a moment. I thought I understood. Not at all. “And this, countryman, this was and is, and *will be*,” he stressed, “Rosario La Ciura.”

The broken-down senator in a dressing gown had been a young god.

Our conversation then turned to other matters. Before I left he showed me a letter in French from the rector of the University of Coimbra inviting him to be a guest of honor at a Greek studies conference in Portugal in May. “I’m very pleased. I’ll go aboard the *Rex* in Genoa along with the French, Swiss, and German participants. Like Odysseus I’ll plug my ears in order not to hear the drivel of those moral cripples, and there’ll be beautiful days of sailing: the sun, the blue sky, the smell of the sea.”

On my way out we again passed the shelf containing the works of Wells, and I ventured to show my surprise at seeing them there. “You’re right, Corbera, they’re ghastly. There’s one novella there that, were I to reread it, would make me spit nonstop for a month; and even you, salon lapdog that you are, you would be appalled.”

Following my visit our relations became decidedly cordial —on my part at least. I went to great lengths to have some exceptionally fresh sea urchins brought in from Genoa. When I learned that they would arrive the following day I procured some Etna wine and farmer’s bread and nervously invited the senator to visit me in my tiny apartment. To my great relief he very happily accepted. I picked him up in my Fiat 508 and dragged him all the way to Via Peyron, which is something of a backwater. In the car he displayed some fear and no confidence whatsoever in my driving skills. “I know you now, Corbera; if we’re unlucky enough to encounter one of your abortions in a frock, you’re liable to turn your head and send us both smashing into the corner of a building.” We met no skirted monstrosity worthy of note and arrived safely.

For the first time since I met him I saw the senator laugh—when we entered my bedroom. “So then, Corbera, this is the theater of your vile exploits.” He examined my few books. “Fine, fine. Perhaps you’re less ignorant than you seem. This one here,” he added as he picked up a volume of Shakespeare, “this one here understood something. ‘A sea-change into something rich and strange.’* ‘What potions have I drunk of Siren tears?’”†

When the good Signora Carmagnola entered the drawing room carrying the tray of sea urchins, lemons, and the rest, the senator was ecstatic. “This was your idea? How did you know they are the thing I long for more than any other?”

“You can safely enjoy them, Senator; this morning they were still in the Ligurian Sea.”

“Yes, of course, your sort are always the same, slaves to your decadence, to your putrescence; your long, asinine ears always straining to make out the shuffling steps of Death. Poor devils! Thank you, Corbera, you’ve been a good famulus. It’s a shame they’re not from the sea down there, these urchins, that they haven’t been steeped in our algae; their spines have surely never drawn a drop of divine blood. You’ve done what was possible, certainly, but these urchins, having dozed on the cold reefs of Nervi or Arenzano, they’re almost *boreal*.” It was clear that he was one of those Sicilians for whom the Ligurian Riviera—considered a tropical region by the Milanese—may as well be Iceland. The urchins, split in half, revealed their wounded, blood-red, strangely compartmentalized flesh. I’d never paid attention before now, but after the senator’s bizarre comparisons they really did seem like cross sections of who knows what delicate female organs. He consumed them avidly but without cheer, with a meditative, almost sorrowful air. He didn’t want to squeeze any lemon over them.

“Your sort, always combining flavors! Sea urchins have to taste also like lemon, sugar also like chocolate, love also like paradise!” When he finished he took a sip of wine and closed his eyes. After a bit I noticed, slipping from beneath his shriveled eyelids, two tears. He stood up and walked to the window, where he furtively dried his eyes. Then he turned. “Have you ever been to Augusta yourself, Corbera?” I’d spent three months there as a recruit; during off-duty hours two or three of us would take a boat out on the transparent waters and explore the gulfs. After my answer he was silent; then, in an irritated voice: “And did you grunts ever arrive as far as the inland gulf past Punta Izzo, behind the hill overlooking the saltworks?”

“We certainly did, it’s the most beautiful spot in Sicily, yet to be discovered, thankfully, by the Dopolavoro crowds.‡ The coast is wild there, right, Senator? It’s completely deserted, and you can’t see a single house; the sea is the color of peacocks; and behind it all, beyond the shifting waves, rises Mount

Etna. From no other spot is it so beautiful—calm, powerful, truly divine. It's a place where you can see the island in one of its eternal aspects, as it was before it so foolishly turned its back on its vocation, which was to serve as pasture for the Cattle of the Sun."

The senator was silent. Then: "You're a good kid, Corbera; if you weren't so ignorant, something might have been made of you." He came toward me and kissed my forehead. "Now bring round your jalopy. I want to go home."

In the weeks that followed we continued to see each other regularly. Now we also took late-night walks, generally down Via Po and across the martial expanse of Piazza Vittorio; we went to gaze at the rushing river and the Turin hills, elements that introduced a drop of fantasy into the geometrical rigor of the city. Then began the spring, that affecting season of threatened youth; the first lilacs sprouted on the banks, and the most impetuous of the young couples without a place to retreat to braved the dampness of the grass. "Down there the sun already blazes, the algae blooms, the fish appear at the surface of the water on moonlit nights, and flashes of bodies can be made out between the lines of luminous foam. We stand here before this insipid, lifeless current of water, before these big ugly buildings that look like soldiers or monks all in a line, and we hear the sobs of these dying creatures coupling." It cheered him, however, to think about the impending voyage to Lisbon, not far off now. "It will be pleasant. You ought to come along as well. A shame that it's not open to those deficient in Greek; with me at least you can speak Italian, but if Zuckmayer or Van der Voos found out you didn't know the optative of every irregular verb, you'd be done for. This even though you may be more in touch with Greek reality than they are; not through cultivation, clearly, but through animal instinct."

Two days prior to his departure for Genoa he told me that he would not be returning to the café the following day, but that he would expect me at his house at nine that evening.

The protocol was identical to the last time: The images of the gods of three thousand years ago radiated youth as a stove radiates heat; the faded photograph of the young god of fifty years ago seemed dismayed at watching his own metamorphosis into a white-haired old man sunk in an armchair.

When the Cypriot wine had been drunk the senator called Bettina and told her she could go to bed. "I will see Signor Corbera out myself when he goes." Then: "Believe me, Corbera, if I've asked you here this evening at the risk of upsetting any Rivoli fornication plans you might have had, it's because I need you. I leave tomorrow, and when you go away at my age you never know if it won't be necessary to stay away forever, especially when you go by sea. Please know that I genuinely care for you: Your ingenuousness touches me, your unconcealed carnal intrigues amuse me, and it seems to me that, as is sometimes the case with the best kind of Sicilians, you have managed to achieve a synthesis of the senses and reason. Therefore you deserve not to be left empty-handed, without hearing me explain the reason behind some of my eccentricities, of some sentences I've spoken in your presence that will certainly have appeared to you worthy of a madman."

I protested weakly: "I haven't understood many of the things you've said, but I've always attributed my incomprehension to the inadequacy of my own mind, never to an aberration of yours."

"Don't worry, Corbera, it doesn't matter. All of us old people seem crazy to you young people, and often in fact the opposite is true. To explain myself, however, I'll have to tell you about my adventure, an uncommon one. It happened when I was 'that young gentleman there,'" and he pointed at his photograph. "I have to go back to 1887, a time that will seem prehistoric to you but is not for me."

He moved from his place behind the desk and came to sit down beside me on the same couch. "Pardon me, but from now on I'll have to speak in a low voice. Important words cannot be bellowed; the 'cry of love' or hate is to be found only in melodrama or among the most uncultivated people, which comes to the same thing in the end. In 1887, then, I was twenty-four years old; I looked like the person in that photograph. I already had my degree in ancient literature and had published two articles on Ionic dialects that had caused a certain stir in my university; and for the previous year I'd been preparing for a competition for a post at the University of Pavia. Also, I had never known a woman. As a matter of fact, I have never known women either before or after that year." I was sure that my face had remained stonily impassive, but I was deceived. "Your eyelash fluttering is very ill-mannered, Corbera. What I say is the truth—the truth and a boast. I know that we Catanesi are held to be capable of impregnating our own nannies, and that may even be true. Not in my case, however. When one passes one's days and nights with goddesses and demigoddesses, as I did during that period, there remains little desire to climb the stairs of the brothels of San Berillo. At the time I was also held back by religious scruples. Corbera, you really should learn to control your eyelashes; they betray you constantly. Yes, I said religious scruples. I also said 'at the time.' Now I no longer have them; but they were worthless in any case.

“You, young Corbera, who probably obtained your position at the newspaper thanks to a note from some Party official, you don’t know what it is to prepare for a competition for a university chair of Greek literature. For two years you slog away, to the limits of sanity. I already knew the language fairly well, fortunately, as well as I know it now; and I don’t say so just for the sake of it, you know...But the rest: the Alexandrine and Byzantine variants of the texts; the passages cited, always poorly, from Latin authors; the countless connections between literature and mythology, history, philosophy, science! I repeat, it’s enough to drive you mad. So I studied like a dog, and also gave lessons to students who’d flunked the subject, to pay the rent on my place in the city. You could say I subsisted on nothing but black olives and coffee. On top of all this came the disastrous summer of 1887, one of those truly infernal summers that we have every so often down there. At night Etna vomited back the fire of the sun that it stored up fifteen hours a day; if you touched the railing of a balcony at noon you’d have to run to the emergency room; volcanic paving stones seemed on the point of returning to their liquid state; and almost every day the sirocco swatted you in the face with sticky bats’ wings. I was on the verge of collapse when a friend came to my aid. He found me wandering the streets, exhausted, muttering Greek verses I no longer understood. My appearance troubled him. ‘Look, Rosario, if you stay here you’ll go mad, and then so much for the competition. Myself, I’m off to Switzerland’—the fellow had money—‘but in Augusta I’ve got a three-room cabin twenty yards from the sea, far from the village. Pack a bag, take your books, and go stay there for the rest of the summer. Come by my place in an hour and I’ll give you the key. Just wait till you see, it’s something else. Ask for the Carobene place at the station, everyone knows it. But you’ve really got to leave—tonight.’

“I followed his advice and left that same evening. On awaking the next morning, rather than the toilet pipes across the courtyard that used to greet me at dawn, I found before me a pure expanse of sea, and beyond it a no longer pitiless Etna, wrapped in the morning mist. The spot was completely deserted, as you said it still is now, and of a singular beauty. The little house’s dilapidated rooms contained just the sofa on which I’d slept, a table, and three chairs; the kitchen, a few earthenware pots and an old lamp. Behind the house were a fig tree and a well. Paradise. I went into the village and tracked down the farmer of the small Carobene estate, and worked out that every few days he would bring me some bread, pasta, vegetables, and kerosene. Olive oil I had, from the supply my poor mother had sent me in Catania. I rented a dinghy that the fisherman brought round that afternoon along with a wicker fish basket and a few hooks. I’d decided to stay there for at least two months.

“Carobene was right: It really was something else. The heat was violent in Augusta too, but, no longer reflected back by walls, it produced not dreadful prostration but a sort of submissive euphoria; the sun, shedding its executioner’s grimace, was content to be a smiling if brutal giver of energy, and also a sorcerer setting mobile diamonds in the sea’s slightest ripple. Study ceased to be toil: Gently rocked by the boat in which I spent hours on end, each book seemed no longer an obstacle to be overcome but rather a key offering me passage into a world, a world I already had before my eyes in one of its most enchanting aspects. I often happened to recite the verses of poets aloud, and thus the names of those gods, which most people have forgotten or never knew, again skimmed the surface of the sea that would have once, at their mere mention, risen up in turmoil or subsided into dead calm.

“My isolation was absolute, interrupted only by visits from the farmer who brought me my few provisions every three or four days. He would only stay for five minutes; seeing me so exhilarated and disheveled, he must have thought me dangerously close to madness. And in truth, the sun, the seclusion, the nights passed beneath the wheeling stars, the silence, the scant nourishment, the study of remote subjects wove around me a spell that predisposed me to marvels.

“This came to pass on the morning of August 5, at six o’clock. I hadn’t been up for long before I was in the boat; a few strokes of the oars took me away from the pebbled shore. I’d stopped at the base of a large rock whose shadow might protect me from a sun that was already climbing, swollen with dazzling fury and turning the whiteness of the auroral sea gold and blue. As I declaimed I sensed that the side of the boat, to my right and behind me, had abruptly been lowered, as if someone had grabbed on to climb up. I turned and saw her: The smooth face of a sixteen-year-old emerged from the sea; two small hands gripped the gunwale. The adolescent smiled, a slight displacement of her pale lips that revealed small, sharp white teeth, like dogs’. This, however, was not a smile like those to be seen among your sort, always debased with an accessory expression of benevolence or irony, of compassion, cruelty, or whatever the case may be; it expressed nothing but itself: an almost bestial delight in existing, a joy almost divine. This smile was the first of her charms that would affect me, revealing paradises of forgotten serenity. From her disordered hair, which was the color of the sun, seawater dripped into her exceedingly open green eyes, over features of infantile purity.

“Our suspicious reason, howsoever predisposed, loses its bearings in the face of the marvelous, and

when it perceives it, tries to rely on the memory of banal phenomena. Like anyone else would have, I supposed that I'd met a swimmer. Moving cautiously, I pulled myself up to her level, leaned toward her, and held out my hands to help her aboard. Instead she rose with astonishing strength straight out of the water to her waist, encircled my neck with her arms, wrapping me in a never before experienced perfume, and allowed herself to be pulled into the boat. Her body below the groin, below the buttocks, was that of a fish, covered with tiny pearly blue scales and ending in a forked tail that slapped gently against the bottom of the boat. She was a Siren.

"She lay back, resting her head on interlaced fingers, displaying with serene immodesty the delicate little hairs of her armpits, her splayed breasts, her perfect stomach. She exuded what I have clumsily referred to as a perfume, a magical smell of the sea, of decidedly youthful sensuality. We were in the shade but twenty yards from us the seashore reveled in the sun and quivered with pleasure. My near-complete nudity ill concealed my own emotion.

"She spoke and thus was I overwhelmed, after her smile and smell, by the third and greatest of her charms: her voice. It was a bit guttural, husky, resounding with countless harmonics; behind the words could be discerned the sluggish undertow of summer seas, the whisper of receding beach foam, the wind passing over lunar tides. The song of the Sirens, Corbera, does not exist; the music that cannot be escaped is their voice alone.

"She spoke Greek and I struggled to understand her. 'I heard you speaking to yourself in a language similar to my own. I like you: take me. I am Lighea, daughter of Calliope. Don't believe the stories about us. We don't kill anyone, we only love.'

"I bent over her as I rowed, staring into her smiling eyes. When we reached the shore I took her aromatic body into my arms and we passed from the blazing sun into the deep shade; there she poured into my mouth such sensual pleasure that it is to your terrestrial kisses as wine is to insipid water."

The senator narrated his adventure in a low voice. I who in my heart had always set my own varied experiences with women against those he regarded as mediocre, and had derived from this a foolish sense of reduced distance, was humiliated: in matters of love as well, I saw myself sunk to unfathomable depths. Never for a moment did I suspect he was lying to me, and had anyone else been there, even the most skeptical of witnesses, he too would have perceived the certainty of truth in the old man's tone.

"So began those three weeks. I have no right, nor would it be merciful to you, to go into details. Suffice to say that in those embraces I enjoyed the highest form of spiritual pleasure along with the greatest physical gratification, devoid of any social resonance, the same that our solitary mountain shepherds experience when they couple with their goats. If the comparison repels you, it's because you're not capable of performing the necessary transposition from the bestial to the superhuman plane—planes that were, in this case, superimposed.

"Think about how much Balzac dared not express in 'Une Passion dans le désert.' From her immortal limbs flowed such life force that any loss of energy was immediately compensated, increased, in fact. In those days, Corbera, I loved as much as a hundred of your Don Juans put together, over their entire lives. And what love! Sheltered from conventions and crimes, the rancor of commendatori and the triviality of Leporellos, far from the claims of the heart, the lying sighs, the phony melting weakness that inevitably mark your sort's wretched kisses. To be honest, a Leporello did disturb us the first day, and it was the only time: Around ten I heard the sound of the farmer's boots on the path that leads down to the sea; just in time, with the farmer at the door, I managed to throw a sheet over the uncommon body of Lighea. Her uncovered head, throat, and arms led our Leporello to believe this was some commonplace affair and hence commanded his sudden respect. His stay was shorter than usual. As he went he winked his left eye, and with his right thumb and index finger at the corner of his mouth made the motion of curling an imaginary mustache; and he returned up the path.

"I spoke of our having spent twenty days together. However, I wouldn't want you to imagine that during those three weeks she and I lived, as they say, 'conjugally,' sharing our bed, meals, and occupations. Lighea's absences were quite frequent. Without any advance notice she would dive into the sea and disappear, sometimes for many hours. When she returned, almost always first thing in the morning, either she found me in the boat or, if I was still in the cabin, wriggled up the pebbled shore till she was half out of the water, on her back and pushing with her arms, calling to be helped up the slope. 'Sasà,' she would call, because I'd told her this was the diminutive form of my name. In this maneuver, made awkward by the same part of her body that granted her agility in the sea, she gave the pitiable impression of a wounded animal, an impression immediately obliterated by the smile in her eyes.

"She ate nothing that was not alive. I often saw her rise out of the sea, delicate torso sparkling in the sun, teeth tearing into a still-quivering silver fish, blood running down her chin; after a few bites the mangled hake or bream would be tossed over her shoulder and sink into the water, staining it red, while

she shouted in childish delight and ran her tongue over her teeth. Once I gave her some wine. Drinking from a glass was impossible for her, so I was obliged to pour some into her small and slightly greenish hand; she lapped up the liquid as dogs do, her eyes registering surprise at the unfamiliar flavor. She said it was good but afterward always refused it. From time to time she came to shore with hands full of oysters or mussels, and while I struggled to open the shells with a knife, she crushed them with a stone and sucked down the throbbing mollusk along with bits of shell that did not trouble her in the least.

"I told you before, Corbera: She was a beast and at the same time an Immortal, and it's a shame that we cannot continuously express this synthesis in speaking, the way she does, with absolute simplicity, in her own body. Not only did she display in the carnal act a cheerfulness and a delicacy altogether contrary to wretched animal lust, but her speech was of a powerful immediacy, the likes of which I have only ever found in a few great poets. Not for nothing was she the daughter of Calliope: Oblivious to all cultures, ignorant of all wisdom, disdainful of any moral constraint whatsoever, she was nevertheless part of the source of all culture, of all knowledge, of all ethics, and she knew how to express this primitive superiority of hers in terms of rugged beauty. 'I am everything because I am only the stream of life, free of accident. I am immortal because all deaths converge in me, from that of the hake just now to that of Zeus; gathered in me they once again become life, not individual and particular but belonging to nature and thus free.' Then she said, 'You are young and handsome. You should follow me into the sea now and escape sorrows and old age. You would come to my home beneath enormous mountains of motionless dark water, where all is silent calm so innate that those who possess it no longer even perceive it. I have loved you, and so remember: When you are tired, when you can truly bear it no longer, all you have to do is lean out over the sea and call me. I will always be there, because I am everywhere, and your dream of sleep will be fulfilled.'

"She told me about her life below the sea, about bearded Tritons and glaucous caverns, but she said that these too were vain appearances and that the truth lay much deeper indeed, in the blind, mute palace of formless, eternal waters, without sparkle, without murmurs.

"Once she told me she would be away for some time, until the evening of the following day. 'I must travel far, to where I know I will find a gift for you.'

"In fact she returned with a stupendous branch of deep red coral encrusted with shells and algae. For a long while I kept it in a drawer and every night I would kiss the spots where I recalled the Indifferent, that is the Beneficent, one had placed her fingers. Then one day my housekeeper, Maria—Bettina's predecessor—stole it to give to one of her pimps. I later found it in a Ponte Vecchio jeweler's shop, deconsecrated, cleaned up and smoothed to the point of being virtually unrecognizable. I bought it back and that same night threw it into the Arno: It had passed through too many profane hands.

"She also spoke to me of the many human lovers she'd had during her thousand-year adolescence: fishermen and sailors—Greeks, Sicilians, Arabs, Capresi—including survivors of shipwrecks clinging to sodden debris, to whom she'd appeared in a flash of lightning during a storm to transform their last gasp into pleasure. 'They all accepted my invitation and came to see me, some immediately, others after having lived what to them seemed a long time. Only one failed to show. He was a big beautiful young man with red hair and exceptionally white skin; I joined myself to him on a beach far away, where our sea flows into the great Ocean. He smelled of something stronger than the wine you gave me the other day. I believe that he failed to show not, surely, because he was happy, but because when we met he was so drunk as not to understand anything anymore. I must have seemed like one of his usual fisherwomen.'

"Those weeks of high summer flew by as rapidly as a single morning; when they'd passed I realized that in fact I had lived centuries. That lascivious girl, that cruel little beast, had also been the wisest of Mothers; with her mere presence she'd uprooted faiths, dispelled metaphysics; with her fragile, often bloodstained fingers she'd shown me the path toward true eternal peace, and also toward an asceticism based not on sacrifice but on the impossibility of accepting other, inferior pleasures. I will certainly not be the second man to fail to heed her call, will not refuse this sort of pagan Grace that has been granted me.

"In accordance with its own violence, that summer was short. Not long after August 20 the first clouds timidly gathered; a few isolated blood-warm drops of rain fell. The nights brought to the distant horizon slow mute flashes of lightning, deduced one from the other like the cogitations of a god. Mornings the dove-gray sea suffered for its hidden restlessness; evenings it rippled without any perceptible breeze, in gradations from smoke gray to steel gray to pearl gray, all extremely soft colors and more affectionate than the splendor before. Faraway shreds of fog skimmed the water; on the coasts of Greece, perhaps, it was already raining. The color of Lighea's mood also changed, from radiance to gray affection. She was silent more often; spent hours stretched out on a rock, staring at the no longer motionless horizon; spent less time away. 'I want to stay here longer with you; if I were to take to the open sea now my marine

companions would keep me there. Do you hear them? They're calling me.' At times I truly did seem to hear a different, lower note among the seagull calls, to make out flashes of movement from rock to rock. 'They're blowing their conches, calling Lighea to the festival of the storm.'

"This set upon us at dawn on the twenty-sixth day. From our rock we saw the approaching wind as it battered distant waters; closer by, sluggish leaden waves swelled ever larger. Soon the gusts arrived, whistling in our ears, bending the withered rosemary bushes. The sea churned below us and the first white-capped surge advanced. 'Farewell, Sasà. You won't forget.' The billow broke upon the rock; the Siren dove into the iridescent spray. I never saw her come down; she seemed to dissolve into the foam."

The senator left the next morning; I went to the station to see him off. He was surly and cutting as usual, but, when the train began to move, his fingers reached through the window to graze my head.

The next day at dawn a telephone call came into the newspaper from Genoa: During the night Senator La Ciura had fallen into the sea from the deck of the *Rex* as it sailed toward Napoli; though lifeboats had been deployed immediately, the body was not found.

A week later came the reading of his will: To Bettina went the bank account and furniture; the library was donated to the University of Catania; in a recently added codicil I was named legatee of both the Greek crater with the Siren figures and the large photograph of the Acropolis kore.

I had the two objects sent to my house in Palermo. Then came the war and while I was stuck in Marmarica with a pint of water a day, the "Liberators" destroyed my house. When I returned I found the photograph had been cut into strips and used by the looters for torches. The crater had been smashed to bits; the largest piece showed the feet of Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship. I still have it today. The books had been stored underground by the university, but, for lack of money for shelves, there they slowly rot.

*William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, act I, scene 2.
†William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets*, 119.
‡The Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (National Recreational Club) was the Italian Fascist leisure and recreational organization.

JOY AND THE LAW

When he climbed aboard the bus, he annoyed everyone.

The briefcase bulging with other people's papers, the enormous package crammed beneath his left arm, his plush gray scarf, the umbrella threatening to open—all this made it difficult for him to show his return ticket. Obliged to rest the package on the driver's change table, he sent scores of coins cascading to the floor; when he tried to kneel down to retrieve them, protests rose behind him from those afraid his delay would cause their coattails to catch in the automatically closing door. He managed to insert himself into the line of people clinging to the bars overhead; slight of build though he was, his bundles conferred upon him the volume of a nun swelled up with seven skirts. As they skidded on the slush through the miserable chaos of the traffic, his awkward bulk spread discontent from one end of the vehicle to the other: He stepped on toes, had his own stepped on, and prompted reproaches; when he even heard slyly muttered allusions to his alleged conjugal misfortunes, honor compelled him to turn his head; he flattered himself that he lodged a threat in the weary expression of his eyes.

Meanwhile they traveled through streets whose rustic baroque façades obscured a wretched hinterland that nonetheless contrived to peek out at every corner. They passed the faintly yellow lights of octogenarian shops.

Approaching his stop, he rang the bell, tripped over his umbrella as he got off, finally found himself alone on his own square yard of uneven sidewalk; he hastened to verify the presence of his plastic wallet. And was free to savor his happiness.

Contained in the wallet was 37,245 lire, the year-end bonus he'd received an hour earlier, amounting to the removal of several thorns from his family's side: his landlord, to whom he owed two quarters' rent, growing more insistent the longer he was thwarted; the exceedingly punctual collector of installment payments on his wife's veste de lapin ("It suits you much better than a long coat, my dear, it's slimming"); the black looks of the fishmonger and greengrocer. The five large banknotes likewise eliminated his dread of the next light bill, the dismayed stares at the children's shoes, the anxious watch for flickers in the bottled-gas flame; the notes hardly represented opulence, to be sure, but they did promise a respite from anguish, which is the true joy of the poor; and perhaps a few thousand lire would survive long enough to be consumed in the splendor of Christmas dinner.

But too many such bonuses had come and gone for him to mistake the fleeting exhilaration produced by them for the euphoria now welling up inside him, rosy and bright. Rosy, yes, rosy like the wrapping of the delicious weight that was making his left arm sore. Indeed, it was precisely from the fifteen-pound panettone he had carried away from the office that the feeling emanated. Not that he was crazy about that reliably mediocre mixture of flour, sugar, egg powder, and raisins. On the contrary, to be honest he didn't even like it. But fifteen pounds of a luxury good all at once! An immense if circumscribed instance of abundance in a house where food typically entered in quarter pounds and pints! An illustrious product in a pantry dedicated to third-rate generics! What joy for Maria! What a thrill for the children, who for two whole weeks would venture into that unknown land of the afternoon snack!

These, however, were the joys of others, material joys composed of vanillin and colored cardboard, of panettones, in other words. His personal happiness was something else entirely, a spiritual happiness mixed with pride and tenderness—yessir, spiritual.

Earlier that day when the commendatore in charge of his office had distributed pay envelopes and Christ-mas wishes with the haughty bonhomie of the old Fascist party official that he was, he'd also said that the fifteen-pound panettone presented to the office by Central Manufacturing would be conferred on the most deserving employee, and thus he entreated his dear staff to democratically (his word) select the lucky man straightaway.

The panettone, meanwhile, stood at the center of his desk, hermetically sealed, "laden with good omens," as the commendatore himself would have said twenty years ago in his black uniform of Sardinian wool. Giggles and whispers had passed from colleague to colleague; then everyone, starting with the director, had shouted his name. A source of great satisfaction, an assurance of continued employment—in short, a triumph. And nothing could have dampened that invigorating sensation, not the three hundred lire he'd had to spend at the wretched "café" below, in the double bruising of a blustery sunset and low-pressure neon, when he'd treated his friends to coffee, nor the swearing he'd had directed at him on the bus—nothing, not even the abrupt realization deep in his consciousness that it had come down to a moment of scornful pity for the neediest among the employees. He truly was too poor to

permit the weed of pride to sprout where it could not survive.

He set off home along a decrepit street to which the bombardments of fifteen years earlier had provided the finishing touches. He arrived in the ghostly little piazza at whose far edge squatted the phantasmal building.

He vigorously greeted the concierge, Cosimo, who despised him for earning less than he did. Nine steps, three steps, nine steps: the floor where the gentleman So-and-So lived. Phooey! He had a Fiat 1100, it's true, but he also had an ugly and licentious old wife. Nine steps, three steps, a slip and near stumble, nine steps: the apartment of Dr. What's-His-Name. Worse than ever! A layabout son who went crazy for Lambretta and Vespa scooters and a waiting room that was always empty. Nine steps, three steps, nine steps: his own apartment, the modest residence of a well-liked and honest man, an esteemed prizewinner, an outstanding accountant.

He opened the door and penetrated the tiny entrance hall already filled with the smell of frying onions and herbs. On a wooden chest as large as a hamper he set down the weighty package, the briefcase loaded with other people's business, the unwieldy scarf. His voice blared out, "Maria! Come quick! Come and see what bounty I have brought!"

His wife emerged from the kitchen in a sky-blue housecoat stained with soot from the pots, her small, dishwater-reddened hands resting on a stomach deformed by multiple births. The children, snot trailing from noses, huddled around the rose-colored monument and squealed without daring to touch it.

"Nicely done! And your salary as well? I haven't got a lira left myself."

"Here it is, dear. I'm keeping just the coins for myself, two hundred forty-five lire. Now, by God, take a look at this!"

Maria had once been pretty, and until a few years ago she'd had a sweet, expressive face illuminated by capricious eyes. Since then, squabbles with shopkeepers had hoarsened her voice, poor food had ruined her complexion, the incessant scanning of a horizon filled with fog and reefs had extinguished the brilliance of her eyes. All that survived in her was a saintly soul, inflexible and without tenderness; a profound goodness reduced to expressing itself in reproaches and prohibitions; and a pride of caste, mortified but tenacious, because she was the granddaughter of a celebrated hatter on Via Indipendenza and despised the less distinguished origins of her Girolamo, whom she nonetheless adored as one does a dull but endearing child.

Her gaze slid dispassionately over the delightful package.

"Very good. Tomorrow we'll send it to Risma. We owe him a favor."

Two years ago the lawyer Risma had hired him for a complicated accounting job, and, in addition to paying him, had invited them both to lunch in his abstractionist, metallic apartment, where the accountant had suffered like a dog in the new shoes he'd bought especially for the occasion. And now, for the sake of this litigator who lacked for nothing, his dear Maria, his boys Andrea and Saverio, his baby daughter Giuseppina, he himself, all forced to surrender the only vein of abundance discovered in so many years!

He ran into the kitchen, grabbed a knife, and rushed to sever the golden twine some industrious Milanese worker had so handsomely knotted atop the wrapping, but a reddened hand fell wearily on his shoulder.

"Don't be a child, Girolamo. You know that we have to return Risma's favor."

It was the Law that spoke, the Law decreed by irreproachable hatters.

"But darling, this is a prize, a token of appreciation, a badge of merit!"

"Let it go. Your colleagues are hardly ones for noble sentiments! It's charity, Girì, nothing but charity." She called him by his old pet name, smiled at him with eyes in which he alone could perceive the traces of her former charms.

"Tomorrow we'll buy another panettone, a little one, which is plenty for us, and four of those red corkscrew candles they've got in the window at Standa; that'll make it a special holiday."

And so the next day he bought a tiny, nondescript panettone, not four but two of the astonishing candles, and engaged an agency to send the colossus to the lawyer Risma, costing him a further two hundred lire.

After Christmas, moreover, he was obliged to purchase a third cake, which, disguised in slices, he had to bring in for the colleagues who'd teased him about not offering them a single crumb of the sumptuous booty.

The fate of the original panettone was thereafter obscured by a curtain of fog.

He went to the agency, Lightning Couriers, to complain. He was grudgingly shown the delivery receipt whose reverse side the lawyer's servant had signed. After Epiphany, however, a visiting card arrived: "With warmest thanks and holiday wishes."

Honor had been preserved.

THE BLIND KITTENS

The map of the Ibba family properties, drawn at 1:5000 scale, occupied a strip of waxed paper six and a half feet long and thirty-two inches high. Not that everything on it belonged to the family. First of all, to the south there was a sliver of sea running along a coast strewn with tuna fisheries that did not belong to anyone; to the north there were inhospitable mountains the Ibbas had never wanted to lay hands on; there were, above all, numerous and not insignificant white areas surrounding the lemon-yellow mass that represented the family's property holdings: lands never acquired because their owners were rich, lands offered for sale but refused on account of their poor quality, lands desired but still in the hands of people being worked on who had yet to become suitably flexible. There were also a very few lands that had once been yellow but had reverted to white because they'd been sold to buy other, better lands during certain bad harvest years when farmers were scarce. Notwithstanding these areas (all at the margins), the yellow body was impressive: From an ovoid nucleus around Gibilmonte a wide branch extended east, narrowed, then broadened again and sent forth two tentacles, one toward the sea, which it reached after a short stretch, the other northward and ending at the foot of the craggy, barren mountains. Westward expansion had been even greater. These were former Church lands, into which the advance had been as fast as a headlong fall, like a knife in lard: The villages of San Giacinto and San Narciso had been breached and overrun by acts of expropriation, the defensive line of the Favarotta River had been held for some time but finally collapsed, and today, September 14, 1901, a bridgehead had been established beyond the river through the purchase of Píspisa, a small but succulent estate bordering the pebbled right bank.

The newly acquired property had yet to be colored yellow on the map, but the India ink and tiny brush waited in the writing desk for the intervention of Calcedonio, the only one in the house who knew how to use them properly. Don Batassano Ibba himself, the head of the family and virtually a baron, had tried ten years ago following the capture of Scíddico, with lamentable results: A sea of pale yellow had washed over the entire map, and he'd had to spend a heap of money to have another one made. The bottle of ink, though, was still the same. On this occasion, therefore, Don Batassano did not risk meddling with it and settled for gazing, with his impudent farmer's eyes, at the space to be colored in, and thought that now, even on a map of all of Sicily, it would be possible to make out the Ibba lands, no bigger than a flea in the island's vastness, of course, and yet clearly visible.

Don Batassano was satisfied but also irritated, two moods that often coexisted in him. The Prince of Salina's lawyer, Ferrara, having arrived that morning from Palermo to draw up the bill of sale, had been captious up until the moment of signing—what am I saying, up until the signing! after as well!—and he'd wanted the sum in eighty big pink Bank of Sicily notes instead of the letter of credit that had already been prepared; and he, Don Batassano, had been forced to climb the stairs and remove the bundle from the most secret drawer of his personal desk, an extremely anxious operation, because at that hour it was possible that Mariannina and Totò were about. It's true that the lawyer had allowed himself to be fooled with respect to the annual fee of eighty lire payable to the Church fund, for which he had agreed to issue 1,600 lire of capitalized value, while Don Batassano (and the notary) knew it had already been paid off nine years earlier by another Salina lawyer. But this wasn't important; even minimal opposition to his will, especially concerning money, exasperated him: "They're up to their necks in debt, forced to sell, and still they take it into their heads to discriminate between banknotes and letters of credit!"

It was only four o'clock and dinner wasn't until five. Don Batassano opened the window that overlooked the meager courtyard. Into the dim room slipped the sultriness of a September seared, baked, and steeped. Down below, an old mustachioed man spread birdlime on lengths of cane, creating amusements for the don's children.

"Giacomino, saddle the horses, mine as well as yours. I'm coming down."

He wished to go see the damage done to the drinking trough in Scíddico; some young vandals had broken one of the basin's coping stones, they'd told him that morning. The crack had already been hastily filled with crushed stone and that mixture of mud and straw that can always be found near where animals drink, but Tano, the leaseholder for Scíddico, had asked for a proper repair to be made immediately. Always new nuisances, new excuses, and if he didn't go in person, the laborer would present him with an extortionate bill. He checked that his holster with the heavy Smith & Wesson hung from his belt: He was so accustomed to having the pistol with him that he no longer noticed its presence.

He went down the slate stairs to the courtyard. The field warden was finishing saddling the horses. He climbed onto his horse, making use of three stone steps placed against a wall for that purpose, took the crop a boy held out to him, and waited for Giacomino to mount (without the aid of the master's stairs). The warden's son threw open the fortified gate, the summer afternoon light flooded the courtyard, and Don Batassano Ibba and his bodyguard rode out onto the main street of Gibilmonte.

The two men proceeded nearly side by side, Giacomino's horse only half a head behind his master's. The warden's "two shot" presented, to the right and left of the saddlebow, its ironclad stock and burnished barrels; the beasts' hooves shuffled arrhythmically on the cobbles of the steep lanes. Women spun thread in front of their doors and did not greet them.

"Mind the horses!" shouted Giacomino from time to time, when some tiny, entirely naked child looked set to tumble between the animals' legs. The archpriest, perched in his chair, head resting against the wall of the church, feigned sleep—in any case, the institution did not belong to the fat cat Ibba but to the poor and absent Santapau. Only the carabinieri sergeant, standing in shirtsleeves on the barracks balcony, inclined his head in greeting. They left the town and climbed the cattle track that led to the watering place. A great deal of water had been lost during the night, and a large puddle had formed around the trough. Mixed with clay, with bits of straw, with cow dung and urine, it gave off a powerful ammoniac smell. But the improvised repair had been effective: water no longer flowed through the joints between the stones but merely beaded there, and the thin stream that fitfully poured from the rusty pipe outpaced the loss. The zero cost of what had been done was gratifying to Don Batassano, causing him to overlook the provisional nature of the repair.

"What was Tano going on about, the trough is in fine shape! It doesn't need a thing more. In fact, you tell that idiot, if he's truly a man, not to let my property be damaged by the first snotty brat to happen by. Try to find their fathers and get them to speak to you, if he can't manage it himself."

On the way back a frightened rabbit crossed their path, spooking Don Batassano's horse and causing it to kick out, and the magnate, who sat astride a handsome English saddle but used loops of rope in place of stirrups, ended up on the ground. He wasn't hurt, and Giacomino, an expert in such things, took the mare by the reins and held her still. Don Batassano, still on the ground, bitterly whipped the snout, ears, and flanks of the animal, which trembled continually and foamed at the mouth. A kick in the stomach concluded the pedagogic exercise. Don Batassano remounted and the two men returned home just as it began to grow dark.

The lawyer Ferrara, meanwhile, unaware that the master of the house had gone out, entered the study and, finding it empty, sat down a moment to wait. In the room was a rack with two rifles, a shelf with a small number of files ("Taxes," "Title Deeds," "Sureties," "Loans" read the labels stuck to the brown cardboard); on the desk the bill of sale signed two hours earlier; on the wall behind, the map.

Ferrara stood up to take a closer look. From his professional experience, from countless indiscretions overheard, he knew well how that enormous mass of property had been assembled: an epic tale of cunning, of lack of scruples, of defiance of the laws, of implacability and also luck, of daring as well. Ferrara considered what interest might have been offered by a differently tinged map, one where, as in the textbooks that showed the Italian expansion of the House of Savoy, successive acquisitions were indicated by different colors. Here, in Gibilmonte, was the embryo: six *tumuli*, about one and a half acres, plus an acre of vineyards and a three-room cottage, everything that Don Batassano's illiterate genius father, Gaspare, had inherited. When still very young Gaspare had seduced the deaf-mute daughter of a local "bourgeois," a minor landowner only slightly poorer than he was, and with the dowry obtained by means of the extorted marriage had doubled his own assets. The disabled wife, Marta, had entered fully into her husband's game: A sordid meanness permitted the couple to put together a small sum that was nonetheless significant in a place like Sicily, where the economy in that period was, as in the ancient city-states, founded exclusively on usury.

The couple made extremely shrewd loans, in particular to persons in possession of property but without sufficient income to cover interest payments. Marta's moans, as she made the rounds of the village to demand her weekly payments, had become proverbial: "When Marta goes a-grumbling, the houses go a-tumbling." In ten years of gesticulating visits, ten years of stealing wheat from the Santapau marquis (to whom Gaspare was tenant farmer), ten years of cautiously shifted boundaries, ten years of gratified appetite, the couple's property holdings had grown fivefold. He was only twenty-eight years old; the current Don Batassano, seven. There had been a rough period after the Bourbon judicial authority had taken it upon itself to investigate one of the bodies that turned up regularly in the fields; Gaspare had had to keep away from Gibilmonte, and his wife spread the word that he was staying with a cousin in Adernò in order to learn how to cultivate mulberries; in fact not a night passed in which the

affectionate Gaspare did not watch from the nearby mountains as the smoke rose from the kitchen of his cheerful little house. Then came the *Mille*, Garibaldi's thousand-man volunteer army: Everything was turned upside down, the troublesome documents disappeared from the public records office, and Gaspare Ibba officially returned home.

Everything was better than ever. It was then that Gaspare conceived a mad maneuver, mad as every act of genius is: Just as Napoleon at Austerlitz dared to hollow out his own center in order to ensnare the foolish Austro-Russians with his powerful flanks, so Gaspare mortgaged all his hard-won patches of earth to the hilt, and with the few lire obtained through this operation made a zero-interest loan to the Marquis Santapau, who was in a tight spot owing to his financial contributions to the Bourbon cause. This was the result: After two years the Santapaus had lost the Balate estate, which they had in any case never seen and which, based on the name—which meant "paving stones" in the local dialect—they presumed infertile; the mortgages on the Ibba properties were lifted, Gaspare became Don Gaspare, and his family dined on mutton every Saturday and Sunday. Once he arrived at his first 100,000 lire, everything proceeded like clockwork: He acquired Church properties for a tenth of their value by paying the first two installments of their pitiful appraisals; owning these groups of houses, the springs that ran through them, the rights of way that they controlled, made the purchase of depreciated lay properties nearby wonderfully easy; the considerable income derived from these allowed for the purchase or expropriation of other, more distant estates.

When Don Gaspare died young, his holdings were nevertheless more than respectable; like the Prussian territories of the mid-eighteenth century, they consisted of large islands separated by others' properties. To his son, as to Frederick II, fell the burden and the glory of unifying it all in a single block, and then of expanding the limits of this block toward ever more distant horizons. Vineyards, olive and almond groves, pastures and emphyteutic rents, and, above all, arable land were annexed and assimilated; their revenues flowed into the humble study in Gibilmonte, where they remained only briefly, soon departing, nearly intact, to be transformed again into land. A wind of uninterrupted fortune swelled the sails of the galleon Ibba, and the name began to be uttered with reverence in every corner of the impoverished island's triangle. Don Batassano meanwhile had been married, at the age of thirty, and not to a handicapped woman like his esteemed mother but to a robust eighteen-year-old, Laura, the daughter of Gibilmonte's notary, who brought a dowry of her own good health, a considerable amount of money, valuable lessons in sophistry from her father, and a submission to his authority that, once her own not insignificant sexual needs were satisfied, was absolute. Eight children were the living proof of this submission; a bitter happiness, deprived of light, reigned in Casa Ibba.

The lawyer Ferrara was a tenderhearted man, an extremely rare type of human being in Sicily. His father had been a member of the Salina administration during the turbulent times of the old Prince Fabrizio, and he himself, raised in the muffled atmosphere of that household, had grown accustomed to desiring a life that was perhaps mediocre, but calm. He was content to gnaw at his own little piece of princely cheese. Those not quite two square yards of waxed paper evoked for him asperities and stubborn struggles that revolted his rodent's—rather more than carnivore's—soul. He had the impression of rereading the installments of *The History of the Bourbons of Naples* that his father, a fervent liberal, would buy him every week. At Gibilmonte, moreover, there wasn't anything like the alleged orgies of Caserta described in the booklets; here everything was rugged, practical, puritanically wicked. He took fright and left the room.

That evening at dinner the entire family was in attendance, except the eldest son, Gaspare, who was in Palermo for the ostensible purpose of preparing to repeat his secondary-school exit exams (he was already twenty). The meal was served with rustic simplicity, with all the cutlery—heavy and ornate though it was—placed in a pile at the center of the table, leaving everyone to fish out what they needed; the servants Totò and Mariannina insisted on serving from the right. The lady Laura was the picture of health in its fullest flower, that is to say, its supreme corpulence: Her voluptuous chin, Gentile nose, and eyes experienced in conjugal passion disappeared into a bloom of lard alluringly fresh and firm; her enormous forms were clothed in black silk, the mark of continually renewed sorrows. Her sons Melchiorre, Pietro, and Ignazio each sat between two of her daughters, Marta, Franceschina, Assunta, and Paolina, every sibling's manifest family resemblance a peculiar mixture of the father's rapacious features and the mother's merciful ones. None paid any attention to dress: gray-on-white printed cretonnes for the girls, sailor suits for the boys, even for the oldest of those present, seventeen-year-old Melchiorre, whose burgeoning whiskers conferred on him the odd aspect of an actual crew member of the Royal Navy. The conversation, or rather the dialogue between Don Batassano and Ferrara, revolved exclusively around two topics: the price of land in the area surrounding Palermo as compared with the

area surrounding Gibilmonte, and anecdotes about aristocratic Palermitan society. Don Batassano considered all these nobles "paupers," even those in possession of a fortune equal to his own, be it only in collections of antiques and leaving income aside. Loath to leave his village, with the exception of rare trips to the provincial capital and even rarer ones to Palermo to "follow" cases in the appellate court, he did not know a single one of these nobles personally and had created an abstract and unvarying image of them, similar to what audiences imagine with respect to Harlequin or Captain Fracasse. Prince A. was a spendthrift, Prince B. a philanderer, Duke C. violent, Baron D. a gambler, Don Giuseppe E. a swordsman, the Marquis F. "aesthetic" (meaning an "aesthete," a euphemism in its turn for worse things), and so on and so forth, each a contemptible picture-card cutout. In these opinions Don Batassano demonstrated a formidable propensity for error, and it can be said there was no epithet that was not erroneously yoked to a name, and certainly no defect that was not fantastically exaggerated, while the real faults of such people remained unknown to him. It was clear that his mind worked in abstractions and that it enjoyed making the purity of the Ibbas stand out against the corrupt background of the old nobility.

Ferrara's knowledge of things was a bit better, but it too was full of gaps, and hence, when he sought to contradict the most outlandish assertions, he quickly ran short of arguments; it was also true that his words provoked such moralistic indignation in Don Batassano that he soon fell silent; in any case they were almost through with dinner.

This had been, in Ferrara's opinion, excellent. The lady Laura was not given, in matters of food, to Pindaric flights; she offered Sicilian cuisine raised to another level —to its cube, in fact—in terms of the number of portions and the abundance of sauces, thus rendering it lethal. The macaroni veritably swam in oil, buried under a mass of caciocavallo cheese; the meats were stuffed with fiery salami; the "trifle in a hurry" contained three times the prescribed amount of liqueur, sugar, and candied fruit. But all this, as previously said, seemed to Ferrara exquisite, the pinnacle of cuisine; on the rare occasions he lunched at Casa Salina, he always came away disappointed by the insipid food. The following day, however, back in Palermo, after having delivered the 78,200 lire to the young prince, Fabrizietto, he described the meal he had been served, and since he knew the prince's fondness for Pré Catelan's *coulis de volaille* and Prunier's *timbales d'écrevisses*, he feigned horror at what he had found excellent; and thus he did something rather pleasing to Salina, who then, during his low-stakes poker game at the club, recounted every detail to his friends, who were always eager for news about the legendary Ibbas; and everyone laughed until the moment when the impassive Peppino San Carlo declared a queens full.

As previously mentioned, curiosity among the noblemen of Palermo with regard to the Ibba family was intense. Curiosity is also the mother of fable, and in these years in fact it gave birth to a hundred fantasies about this sudden fortune. The fantasies testified not only to the childishly ebullient imagination of the upper classes but also to an unconscious discomfort at seeing that it was possible, at the dawn of the twentieth century, to assemble a great fortune based exclusively on land, a form of wealth that each of these gentlemen, from bitter experience, knew to be demolition material, unsuited to the construction of grand edifices. These same property owners felt that the Ibbas' modern reincarnation of the boundless fields of grain of the Chiaromonte or the Ventimiglia of centuries past was irrational and even, for them, dangerous; hence they secretly opposed it, and not only because this imposing structure was in large part erected with material that had previously belonged to them, but because they perceived it as a manifestation of the permanent anachronism that is the brake on the wheels of the Sicilian cart, an anachronism that many perceived but none escaped or avoided supporting in some way.

It bears repeating that this discomfort remained latent in the collective unconscious, only emerging in the guise of tall tales and jokes, as befits a class that makes scarce use of general ideas. The first and most elementary form of such tales is the exaggeration of figures, always elastic in our part of the world. Notwithstanding the ease with which such things might be verified, Batassano Ibba's fortune was appraised at several tens of dozens of millions; one bold individual dared to speak once of "almost a billion" but was silenced, truth be told, because this figure, commonplace today, was so rarely employed in 1901 that nearly everyone was ignorant of its true meaning, and in that time of gold lira coins, to say a billion lire was as much as to say nothing. Concerning the origins of this fortune similar fantasies were woven: The humility of Don Batassano's birth was difficult to exaggerate (old Corrado Finale, whose mother was a Santapau, had hinted that Batassano was the son of a brother-in-law of his who had for a time resided in Gibilmonte, but the tale was given little credence on account of Finale's well-known habit of attributing to himself or his relatives the secret paternity of whatever notorious figure was under discussion, be it a victorious general or celebrated prima donna); on the other hand, the single ordinary corpse that had troubled Don Gaspare was multiplied by ten, by a hundred, and there was no liquidation of an individual occurring in the previous thirty years (and quite a few had occurred) that was not

imputed to the Ibbas, who were nevertheless, penally speaking, in fine shape. This was, however surprisingly, the most benevolent aspect of the legend, because the fact of violence, when unpunished, was at the time considered estimable, the halos of Sicilian saints being bloody.

To these locally sown inventions were added the transplants. Dusted off for this purpose, for instance, was the story told a hundred years earlier of Testasecca, of how he had ordered a narrow canal to be dug and his hundreds of cows and thousands of sheep gathered uphill, then milked simultaneously, providing King Ferdinand IV with the spectacle of a brook of frothy warm milk running before him. This fable (not without a certain poetic, specifically pastoral quality, which ought to have betrayed its Theocritean origin), with the simple substitution of Umberto I for King Ferdinand, now came to be charged to Don Batassano. And though it was frightfully easy to prove that the former sovereign had never set foot on the Ibba lands, the tale survived, indisputable.

It was for these reasons for malice mixed with fear that, when the poker game broke up, the conversation turned again to the topic of the Ibbas. A group of ten members had gathered on the club's terrace, which overlooked a peaceful courtyard and was shaded by a tall tree that rained down lilac petals on the mostly elderly gentlemen. Servants in red and blue brought drinks and cups of gelato. From the depths of a wicker armchair came the unfailingly irascible voice of Santa Giulia.

"Honestly, now, can anyone say how much land this wretched Ibba really has?"

"We can, and I do. Thirty-five thousand four hundred acres," San Carlo answered coolly.

"That's all? I thought it was more."

"Thirty-five thousand? Rubbish! According to people who've been there, it can't be less than fifty thousand acres, that's dead certain, and all of it prime farmland."

General Làscari, who appeared immersed in his reading of the *Tribuna*, abruptly lowered the newspaper and showed his liverish face, lined with yellow wrinkles, in which stood out, severe and slightly sinister, the extremely bright whites of the eyes, like those of certain Greek bronzes.

"The figure is seventy thousand acres, not one more and not one less. My nephew, whose cousin is the wife of Ibba's prefect, told me so. That's the way it is, and so be it; there's no point in discussing it further."

Pippo Follonica, a visiting Roman envoy, began to laugh. "Honestly, if you're so interested, why not send someone to look at the cadastral register? It's easy to find out the truth, this truth at least."

The rationality of the proposal was but indifferently received. What Follonica failed to understand was the emotional rather than statistical nature of the discussion: These gentlemen were exchanging envies, grudges, fears, all things that cadastral documents would not suffice to sooth.

The general fumed. "When *I* tell you something, there is no need for cadasters, nor counter-cadasters." His good manners then mellowed him toward the guest. "Dear Prince, you do not know what the cadaster is like in our parts! The transfer deeds are never registered, which means you'll still find individuals listed as owners who have sold everything and moved into the poorhouse."

Confronted with a refutation so rich in local detail, Follonica tried another tack. "Let us concede that the total number of acres remains obscure, but the value of the property in the hands of this boor, who arouses so much passion in you, must be known!"

"This we know very well: eight million net."

"Rubbish!" Thus did every sentence out of Santa Giulia's mouth begin. "Rubbish! Not one cent less than ten!"

"What world are you living in? You don't know anything about anything! He's got twenty-five million in land alone. Then there's the rents, the capital he's loaned out and not yet turned into property, the value of the livestock. That makes at least another fifteen million." The general had laid down his newspaper and was clearly distressed. The imperiousness of his manner had for years been a source of irritation to the entire club—each of whose members wished to be the only one making incontrovertible statements—such that there immediately formed against this opinion a coalition of renewed antipathies and, without reference to the greater or lesser truth of the facts, the appraised value of the Ibba properties fell precipitously.

"This is all fantasy. Claims about money, like those about saintliness, ought to be taken with a grain of salt. If Batassano Ibba has ten million, all included, that's already a lot."

The figure had been distilled from nothing, that is, out of polemical necessity; but when it was spoken, corresponding as it did to the desire of each man, it calmed everyone down, with the exception of the general, who gesticulated from the depths of his armchair, powerless against his nine adversaries.

A waiter entered carrying a long wooden pole, at its tip a burning bit of spirit-infused flock. The gentle glow of sunset gave way to the harsher light of a gas lamp. The Roman was rather enjoying himself. It was his first time in Sicily, and during his five-day stay in Palermo he'd been received in several houses

and begun to change his mind about the supposed provincialism of Palermitan society: the dinners had been well served, the reception rooms beautifully appointed, the ladies elegant and full of grace. But now, this impassioned discussion about the fortune of an individual whom none of the disputants knew nor wished to know, this blatant exaggeration, this hysterical gesticulation over nothing, caused him to reconsider anew. It all reminded him a bit too much of the conversations he would hear in Fondi or in Palestrina, when he went to attend to his estates, and perhaps also of the Bésuquet pharmacy, a memory that, ever since he'd read Daudet's *Tartarin*, never failed to make him smile. And so he laid in a supply of anecdotes to tell his friends a week later when he would be back in Rome. But he was mistaken. He was too much a man of the world to be accustomed to plunging his investigation below the most superficial appearances, and what appeared to him the humorous exhibition of provincialism was anything but comic; it was the tragic convulsions of a class that saw its own primacy as large landowners—that is, its own raison d'être and the source of its social continuity—slipping away, and that sought in arbitrary exaggerations and contrived reductions outlets for its anger, relief for its fears.

Since it was impossible to arrive at the truth, the conversation strayed. The interlocutors still aimed at an investigation of the private affairs of Batassano Ibba, but set about considering those pertaining more specifically to his person.

"He lives like a monk. Gets up at four in the morning, heads to the piazza to take on the day's workers, looks after his business interests all day long, eats nothing but pasta and vegetables with olive oil, and every night he's in bed by eight."

"A monk married with eight children, mind you," Salina protested. "One of my employees spent twenty-four hours in the man's home. The house is ugly but large and comfortable—decent, in other words. The wife must have been beautiful once. The children are well dressed, actually one is studying here in Palermo. And the food served at his table is heavy but plentiful, as I've already described to you."

The general held firm. "You believe everything people tell you, Salina; or, let's say, they wanted to throw smoke in the eyes of that employee of yours, who must be a fool. Bread, cheese, and oil lamps, that's Ibba's daily life, his true life. It's obvious that when someone arrives from Palermo, he puts on a display to dazzle us, or so he flatters himself."

Santa Giulia writhed in his chair under the impetus of the information he wished to communicate; his well-shod feet stamped the floor, his hands trembled, cigarette ash stippled his jacket. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, you are speaking utter rubbish, and could not be more mistaken. I know how things stand there. The wife of one of my field wardens is from Torrebella, just down the road from Gibilmonte; every so often she goes to see a sister of hers who married someone there, and she tells her everything. No source more certain than that, it seems to me." He sought confirmation of his own certainty in the eyes of each man, and as everyone was enjoying themselves, he easily found it. Despite the absence of any modest ear to respect, he lowered his voice; without this melodramatic precaution, the effect of the revelations would not have been the same.

"There's a cottage, two and a half miles from Gibilmonte, that Don Batassano had built and fit out in the most luxurious manner you can imagine, with Salci furniture and all the rest." Bits of what he recalled from Catulle Mendès novels, nostalgic reminiscences of Parisian brothels, yearnings long fostered but never fulfilled appeared before his mind's eye. "He called Rochegrosse from Paris to fresco all the rooms; the great painter stayed three months in Gibilmonte and demanded one hundred thousand lire every month." (Rochegrosse had in fact been in Sicily two years earlier: He'd stayed for eight days, along with his wife and three children, and left again after quietly visiting the Cappella Palatina, Segesta, and the quarry prisons in Syracuse.) "It cost a fortune, but what frescoes! Stuff to raise the dead! Nude women, all nude, dancing, drinking, coupling with men and with each other, in every position, in all possible ways. Masterpieces! An encyclopedia, I'm telling you, an encyclopedia of pleasures! Nothing less than what you'd expect from a Parisian given one hundred thousand lire a month and a free hand. Don Batassano received them there by the dozens: Italian women, Frenchwomen, Germans, Spaniards. La Belle Otero was there once as well, of that I'm certain. There an Ibba created his personal Parc aux Daims, like Louis XVI."

This time Santa Giulia had truly made an impression; to a man his listeners sat stunned. Not that they believed him, but they found the fantasy highly poetic; each of them wished for Ibba's millions so that others would invent similarly sumptuous lies about him.

The first to shake off the poetic spell was the general. "And how do you know this? Have you been in the cottage? As an odalisque, or a eunuch?"

Everyone laughed, including Santa Giulia. "I've already told you: My warden Antonio's wife has seen the paintings."

"Excellent! So your warden's a cuckold!"

“Rubbishy rubbish! She was there to drop off some sheets she’d washed. They didn’t have her in, but a window was open and she saw everything.”

The castle of lies was clearly extremely fragile, but so beautiful—made up of women’s thighs, obscene acts without names, great painters, and one 100,000 lire bills—that no one wanted to blow on it and make it fall.

Salina pulled out his watch. “My goodness, it’s already eight! I must get home to dress. Tonight is *La Traviata* at the Teatro Politeama, and Bellincioni singing ‘Amami, Alfredo!’ is not something to be missed. See you in our box.”

La Sirena

Guiseppe Tomasi de Lampedusa

Traducción de Rafael Antúnez

Al final del otoño de 1938 me encontraba en plena crisis de misantropía. Residía en Turín y la "tota" n.1, al hurgar en mis bolsillos, mientras yo dormía, en busca de un billete de cincuenta liras, había hallado, una cartita de la "tota" n.2 que aún con sus faltas de ortografía, no dejaba dudas sobre la naturaleza de nuestras relaciones. Mi despertar había sido brusco y borrascoso. La habitación de la calle Peyros resonó de improperios vernáculos; hizo un intento por sacarme los ojos, el cual pude frenar torciendo un poco la mano izquierda de la querida muchacha.
Esta acción definitiva, plenamente justificada, puso fina a la escena y también al idilio.
La muchacha se vistió a toda prisa, guardó en su bolso la polvera, el lápiz labial y el billete de cincuenta liras "causa de tantos males". Me espetó a la cara un triple "puerco" y se fue.
Nunca había estado tan bella como en esos quince minutos de furia. Desde la ventana la vi salir y alejarse entre la neblina de la mañana, alta, esbelta, dueña de una reconquistada elegancia.

Nunca la volví a ver, como tampoco he vuelto a ver un "pullover" de cachemira negro que me había costado un ojo de la cara y que tenía el funesto mérito de servir tanto a hombres como a mujeres.

Ella dejó sobre la cama dos de aquellas horquillas retorcidas llamadas "invisibles".

La misma tarde tenía una cita con la n.2 en una pastelería de la plaza Carlo Felicia. En la mesita redonda de la esquina oeste de la segunda sala que era la "nuestra" no vi los cabellos castaños de la muchacha, más deseada que nunca, y en su lugar hallé el pícaro rostro de Tonino, su hermano de doce años que recién había terminado de engullir un chocolate con doble nata. Cuando me acerqué se puso de pie con la acostumbrada educación turinesa. "Monsú", me dijo, "la Pinotta no vendrá, me ha pedido darle esta tarjeta. Adios Monsú". Y salió llevándose dos "brioches" que aún quedaban en el plato. Con el cartoncito color marfil se me notificaba un despido absoluto, motivado por mi infamia y "deshonestidad meridional". Estaba claro que la n.1 había buscado y encontrado a la n.2 y que yo me había quedado como el perro de las dos tortas.

En doce horas había perdido dos muchachas útilmente complementarias entre sí, más un "pullover" que me gustaba mucho y había tenido que pagar la cuenta del infernal Tonino. Mi siciliansímo amor propio estaba humillado. Estaba quebrado, así que decidí abandonar por un tiempo el mundo y sus pompas.

Para este período de retiro no podía encontrar un sitio más propicio que el café de la calle Po, donde ahora iba, solo como un perro, en mi tiempo libre y por las noches después del trabajo en el periódico. Era una especie de Hades poblado por exangües sombras de tenientes coroneles, magistrados y profesores jubilados. Estas vanas apariencias jugaban damas o dominó inmersos en una luz oscurecida en el día por los pórticos y por las nubes, y

por la noche por las enormes pantallas verdes de las lámparas; y nunca alzaban la voz, temerosos como eran, de que un sonido demasiado fuerte habría hecho temblar la débil trama de sus apariencias. Un verdadero limbo.

Como el animal de costumbres que soy, me sentaba siempre en la misma mesita de la esquina esmeradamente diseñado para ofrecer el máximo posible de incomodidad al cliente. A mi izquierda, dos espectros de oficiales superiores jugaban "tric trac" con dos larvas de consejeros de la corte de apelaciones; los dados militares y judiciales salían silenciosos del baso de cuero. A mi derecha se sentaba siempre un señor de edad muy avanzada, envuelto en viejo capote con cuello raído de astracán. Leía sin tregua revistas extranjeras, fumaba cigarrillos toscanos y escupía mucho, de tanto en tanto cerraba la revista y parecía perseguir en las volutas de humo algún recuerdo. Después, volvía a la lectura y sus apuntes. Tenía unas manos feas y nudosas, rojizas con las uñas cortadas rectas aunque no siempre limpias. Pero una vez que en una de sus revistas se topó con la fotografía de una antigua estatua griega, de esas que tienen los ojos alejados de la nariz y una sonrisa ambigua, me sorprendí viendo que yemas deformes acariciaban la imagen con una delicadeza francamente real. Al descubrir que lo había visto, gruñó irritado y ordenó un segundo *expresso*.

Nuestras relaciones habrían quedado sobre aquel plano de latente hostilidad, de no haber sido por un afortunado incidente. Yo llevaba conmigo de la redacción cinco o seis periódicos, entre ellos, una vez, el *Giornale di Sicilia*. Eran los años en los que la censura se ensañaba más y todos los periódicos eran idénticos; aquel número del cotidiano palermitano era más banal que nunca y no se distinguía de un periódico de Milán o de Roma si no por la imperfecta tipografía. Mi lectura de éste fue breve y muy pronto lo abandoné sobre la mesa. Apenas había iniciado la lectura de otra encarnación de la censura, cuando me vecino me dirigió la palabra: "Perdone, señor, ¿le molestaría si diese una ojeada a su *Giornale di Sicilia*? Soy siciliano y desde hace veinte años que no veo un periódico de mi tierra". La voz era muy cultivada, el acento impecable; los ojos grises del viejo me miraban con profunda distancia. "Por favor. Sabe, yo también soy siciliano, si lo desea puedo traerle el periódico todos los días por la noche". "Gracias , no creo que sea necesario; la mía es una simple curiosidad física. Si la Sicilia es ahora como en mis tiempos, imagino que no ha pasado nada bueno, como desde hace tres mil años".

Ojeó el periódico, lo dobló, me lo devolvió y engolfó en la lectura de un opúsculo. Cuando se fue, deseaba a todas luces, escabullirse sin saludar, pero yo me levanté y me presenté; murmuró entre dientes su nombre, que no pude comprender, pero no me dio la mano Ya en el umbral del café, se volvió, se levantó el sombrero y gritó con fuerza: "Adiós paisano". Desapareció bajo los pórticos dejándome asombrado y provocando murmullos de desaprobación entre las sombras que jugaban.

Cumplí los ritos mágicos para hacer materializarse a un mesero y le dije señalando la mesa vacía: "¿Quién era ese señor? "Ese –respondió– es el senador Rosario La Ciura.

El nombre decía mucho aun a mi pobre cultura periodística: era uno de los cinco o seis italianos que poseían una indiscutida reputación universal, la del más ilustre helenista de nuestros tiempos. Comprendí las voluminosas revistas y la ilustración acariciada; también la aspereza y el velado refinamiento.

Al día siguiente, en el periódico, hurgué en ese singular archivo que contiene las necrologías que están en "espera". "La Ciura" estaba ahí, pasablemente redactada. Decía que como el gran hombre nació en Aci-Castelo (Catania) en una pobre familia de la pequeña burguesía, como gracias a una sorprendente actitud hacia el estudio del griego y a fuerza de becas y publicaciones eruditas había obtenido a los veintisiete años la cátedra de literatura griega en la Universidad de Pavia; como después fue llamado a la de Turín donde había permanecido, hasta su jubilación; había impartido cursos en Oxford y en Tübingsen y realizado muchos viajes, incluso largos, porque, senador pre-facista y académico de los Lincei, era doctor "honoris causa" por Yale, Harvard, Nueva Delhi y Tokio entre otras de, se entiende, las más ilustres universidades europeas de Upsala a Salamanca. La lista de sus publicaciones era larguísima y muchas de sus obras, especialmente acerca de los dialectos jónicos, eran reputadas como fundamentales; baste decir que había recibido el encargo, caso único entre los extranjeros, de cuidar teuberiana de Hesiodo, para la que escribió una introducción latina de insuperable profundidad científica; en fin, gloria máxima, no era miembro de la Academia de Italia. Lo que lo había distinguido de otros de sus eruditos colegas era el sentido vivo, casi carnal, de la antigüedad clásica y esto se había manifestado en una reunión de ensayos italianos *Hombres y dioses* obra estimada no sólo por su alta erudición sino por su viva poesía. En suma, era "el honor de una nación y un faro de todas las culturas", así concluía el compilador de la esquela. Tenía 75 años y vivía, lejos de la opulencia, pero decorosamente con su pensión y el sueldo de ex senador. Era soltero.

Es inútil negarlo: nosotros los italianos, hijos (o padres) de primeras nupcias del Renacimiento, estimamos al Gran Humanista superior a cualquiera otro ser humano. La posibilidad de hallarme en cotidiana proximidad del más alto representante e esta delicada sabiduría, casi necromántica y poco redituable, me halagaba y turbaba a la vez; sentía la misma sensación de un joven estadounidense que fuera presentado al señor Gillette: temor, respeto y una forma particular de no innoble envidia.

Por la noche descendí al Limbo con un espíritu muy distinto al de los día anteriores. El senador estaba ya en su puesto y respondió a mi saludo reverencial con un murmullo apenas perceptible. Pero cuando terminó de leer un artículo y de completar algunos apuntes en una pequeña agenda, se volvió hacia mí y me dijo con una voz extrañamente musical: «Paisano, por el modo como me has saludado estoy seguro que alguna de estas larvas te ha dicho quien soy. Olvídalo y, si no lo has hecho, olvida también los aoristos [1] que estudiaste en la escuela. Mejor dime cómo te llamas, porque ayer en la noche has hecho la típica presentación farfullada y yo no tengo, como tú, el recurso de preguntar tu nombre a los otros, porque aquí, de seguro, nadie te conoce.»

Hablaba con insolente distancia; era notorio que yo era para él menos que un escarabajo, una especie de partícula de polvo, de esas que bailan sin sentido en los rayos del sol. Pero la voz moderada, la palabra precisa, el «tú», daban la sensación de serenidad de un diálogo platónico.

«Me llamo Paolo Corbera, nací en Palermo, donde me gradué en leyes; ahora trabajo en la redacción de la *Stampa*. Puedo asegurarle, senador, para su tranquilidad, que en la escuela saqué un *cinco más* en griego, y creo que el *más* me lo pusieron para poder darme el diploma.»

Sonrió a medias.

«Gracias por decírmelo, mejor así. Detesto hablar con gente que cree saber, cuando por el contrario, ignora, como mis colegas de la Universidad; en el fondo no conocen otra cosa que las formas exteriores del griego, sus extravagancias y sus deformidades. El espíritu, vivo de esta lengua neciamente llamada "muerta", no les ha sido revelado. Por otro lado nada les ha sido revelado. Pobre gente, ¿cómo podrían advertir este espíritu si nunca han tenido ocasión de oír el griego?»

El orgullo, si está bien, es preferible a la falsa modestia; pero a mí me parecía que el senador exageraba; me pareció que los años habían reblandecido aquel cerebro excepcional. Aquellos pobres diablos de sus colegas habían tenido tantas ocasiones de oír el griego antiguo como él, o sea, ninguna.

El proseguía:

«Paolo... Eres afortunado por llamarte como el único apóstol que tenía un poco de cultura y una pasada de buenas letras. Girolano habría estado mejor. Los otros nombres con que ustedes los cristianos andan por el mundo son verdaderamente viles. Nombres de esclavos.»

Continuaba decepcionándome; parecía el típico comecuras académico con una pizca de nietzcheaninsmo facista. ¿Sería posible?

Continuaba hablando con la seductora modulación de su voz y con el ardor de quien, quizá, ha estado mucho tiempo en silencio.

«Corbera... ¿Me engaño o no es este un gran nombre siciliano? Recuerdo que mi padre pagaba por nuestra casa de Aci-Castello una pequeña renta anual a la administración de una casa Corbera de Palina o Salina, no recuerdo bien. Y siempre decía que si en el mundo algo había seguro, era que aquellas pocas monedas no terminarían en los bolsillos del "dominio directo", como él decía. Pero, ¿tú eres uno de esos Corbera o solamente el descendiente de uno de esos campesinos que ha tomado el nombre de su señor?»

Confesé que era un Corbera di Salina, el único ejemplar sobreviviente de esa familia: todos los fastos, todos los pecados, todas las rentas no pendientes, todos los pesos no pagados, todas las gatopardeces en suma estaban concentradas sólo en mí. Paradójicamente, el senador, pareció contento.

«Bien, bien. Tengo una alta consideración por las viejas familias. Poseen una memoria, minúscula, es verdad, pero en modo caso mayor a las otras. Es lo más que pueden

conseguir en cuanto a inmortalidad física. Piensas casarte pronto, Corbera, ya que ustedes no han encontrado nada mejor para sobrevivir, que el depender de su simiente en los sitios más extraños.»

Decididamente, me impacientaba. «Ustedes, ustedes» ¿Ustedes, quiénes? ¿Todo el vil rebaño que no tenía la fortuna de ser el senador La Ciura? Y él, ¿había conseguido acaso la inmortalidad física? No se podría decir esto si se miraba el rostro rugoso, el cuerpo pesado...

«Corbera di Salina», continuaba impertérrito. «¿No te ofende si continuo tuteándote como a uno de mis alumnos que, por un instante, son jóvenes?»

Me declaré no sólo honrado sino feliz, como de hecho lo estaba. Superadas las cuestiones de nombre y de protocolo, se habló de Sicilia. Hacía veinte años que él no ponía un pie ahí, y la última vez que había estado *allá abajo* (así decía, a la manera piamontesa), había permanecido sólo cinco días, en Siracusa, para discutir con Paolo Osi algunas cuestiones sobre la alternancia de los semicoros en las representaciones clásicas.

«Recuerdo que me querían llevar en coche de Catania a Siracusa; sólo acepté cuando descubrí que en Augusta la carretera pasa lejos del mar, mientras el ferrocarril pasa por el litoral. Cuéntame de nuestra isla; es una tierra bella, aunque poblada por asnos. Los Dioses la han habitado, quizá en los interminables agostos la habiten aún. Pero no me hables de esos cuatro recentísimos que tienen, porque, estoy seguro, no entiendes nada.

Hablamos de la Sicilia eterna, de las cosas de la naturaleza, del perfume de romero en los Nébrodi [2], del gusto de la miel de Melilli, del ondear de las mieses en un día ventoso de mayo, como se ve desde Enna, de la soledad en torno a Siracusa, de las ráfagas de perfume vertidas sobre Palermo, según cuentan, por los agrios en algunos atardeceres de Junio. Hablamos del encanto de ciertas noches estivales frente al golfo de Castellammare, cuando las estrellas se reflejan en el mar que duerme y el espíritu de quien está recostado boca arriba entre los lentiscos, se pierde en el vórtice del cielo mientras el cuerpo, quieto y alerta, teme la llegada de los demonios.

Tras una ausencia de casi cincuenta años el Senador conservaba un recuerdo singularmente preciso de algunos hechos mínimos. «El mar; el mar de Sicilia es el más colorido, el más romántico de cuantos he visto; es la única cosa que no lograrán echar a perder, fuera de las ciudades, se entiende. En las fondas a la orilla del mar ¿todavía sirven los erizos partidos por mitad?» Le dije que sí, pero añadí que muy pocos los comen ahora, por temor al tifus. «Pero sí son la cosa más bella que hay allá abajo, aquellos cartílagos sanguíneos, aquellos simulacros de órganos femeninos perfumados de sal y de algas. ¡Qué tifus ni que tifus! Serán peligrosos como todos los dones del mar que da juntos la muerte y la inmortalidad. En Siracusa se los pedí perentoriamente a Orsi. ¡Qué sabor, que aspecto divino! ¡El más bello recuerdo de mis últimos cincuenta años!»

Estaba confuso y fascinado; un hombre así, que se abandonaba a metáforas casi obscenas, que exhibía una glotonería casi infantil por las, después de todo, ¡mediocres delicias de los erizos de mar!

Hablamos aún largamente y él, al despedirse, se obstinó en pagarme el espresso, no sin manifestar su singular rudeza («Ya se sabe, estos muchachos de buena familia no tienen un centavo en la bolsa»), y nos separamos como amigos, si no se toma en consideración los cincuenta años que dividen nuestra edad y los miles de años luz que separan nuestra cultura.

Seguimos encontrándonos cada noche y, si bien el humo de mi furor contra la humanidad comenzaba a disiparse, me impuse el deber de no dejar de encontrarme nunca con el Senador en los infiernos de la calle Po; no era que charlásemos muchos: él seguía leyendo y tomando apuntes y me dirigía la palabra sólo de tanto en tanto, pero cuando hablaba era siempre un armonioso fluir de orgullo e insolencia, mezclado con alusiones disparatadas y venas de incomprensible poesía. También continuaba escupiendo, y terminé por descubrir que lo hacía sólo mientras leía. Creo que él también sentía cierto afecto por mí, pero no me hacía ilusiones: si había tal afecto, no era el de uno de «nosotros» (para usar la terminología del senador) puede sentir por un ser humano; era más parecido al que una vieja solterona puede sentir hacia su canario, del cual conoce su fatuidad y su falta de comprensión pero cuya existencia le permite expresar en voz alta añoranzas en las cuales el animalito no tiene parte alguna; pero si éste no estuviera allí, ella se sentiría invadida por la zozobra. Comencé a notar, en efecto, que cuando tardaba, los ojos altivos del viejo, permanecían fijos en la puerta.

Pasó cerca de un mes para que de las siempre originalísimas consideraciones, pero siempre generales de parte suya, se pasara a los argumentos indiscretos que son, a fin de cuentas, lo que distingue las conversaciones entre amigos de aquellas entre simples conocidos. Fui yo quien tomó la iniciativa. Su inveterada costumbre de escupir me fastidiaba (había fastidiado también a los guardianes del Hades, que terminaron por colocar a su lado una escupidera de latón pulido) así que una noche me atreví a preguntarle porqué no se hacía curar ese insistente catarro. Hice la pregunta sin reflexionar, y me arrepentí de inmediato de haberla hecho, esperando que la ira senatorial hiciera caer sobre mi cabeza los estucos del techo. En vez de ello, la voz bien timbrada me respondió inalterable:

«Pero, querido Corbera, yo no tengo ningún catarro. Tú que observas todo con tanto cuidado debiste notar que no toso nunca antes de escupir. Mis escupitajos no son signos de enfermedad, sino de salud mental: escupo por el disgusto que me provocan las estupideces que voy leyendo; si quieres tomarte el trabajo de examinar ese trasto (y señalaba la escupidera) notarás que contiene muy poca saliva y ningún rastro de flemas. Mis escupitajos son simbólicos y altamente culturales; si no te agradan, vuelve a tus saloncitos nativos donde nadie escupe, sólo porque no se quiere sentir nauseas de nada.»

La extraordinaria insolencia era atenuada solamente por la mirada lejana, aún así, sentí deseos de levantarme y de dejarlo plantado; por fortuna tuve tiempo para reflexionar que la culpa era de mi imprudencia. Me quedé, y el impasible senador pasó de inmediato al contraataque.

«Y tú, ¿por qué frecuentas este Erebo lleno de sombras y, como dices, de catarro, este geométrico lugar de vidas fallidas? En Turín no faltan estas criaturas que a ustedes les parecen tan deseables. Una vuelta por el hotel del Castello, por Rivoli o Moncalieri a los baños y su impúdico solaz vicios se habrá realizado

Me eché a reír oyendo de una boca ten sapiente información tan exacta de lugares de placer turineses.

«Pero, ¿cómo le hace usted para conocer esas direcciones, Senador?»

«Las conozco, Corbera, las conozco. Frecuentando los senados políticos y académicos se aprende esto, solamente esto. Me hará el favor de creer que sus sórdidos placeres nunca han sido del interés de Rosario La Ciura».

Se oía sincero: en la actitud, en las palabras del senador estaba el signo irrevocable (como se decía en 1938) de un recato sexual que no tenía nada que ver con la edad.

«La verdad, Senador, es que yo comencé a venir aquí como una forma de asilo temporal, lejos del mundo. Tuve problemas con dos de esas muchachas que usted justamente estigmatiza».

Su respuesta fue fulminante y despiadada:

«¿Cuernos, eh Corbera? ¿o acaso enfermedades?»

«Ninguna de las dos cosas: peor aún: abandono».

Y le conté los ridículos acontecimientos de dos meses atrás. Se los conté en son de broma, porque la herida de mi amor propio ya se había cicatrizado; cualquier persona que no hubiera sido el condenado helenista, lo habría tomado a la ligera o, excepcionalmente, me hubiese compadecido. Pero el terrible viejo no hizo ni lo uno ni lo otro: se indignó.

«Es lo que pasa, Cobera, cuando copulan seres enfermos y escuálidos. Y lo mismo diría de ti a las dos busconas, si tuviese la desgracia de topármelas».

«¿Enfermizas, Senador? Las dos están muy bien, necesitaría verlas cómo comían cuando cenábamos en los *Specchi*; y de escuálidas, nada: eran magníficas chicas, y muy elegantes».

El senador dejó escapar uno de esos desdeñosos suspiros.

«Enfermizas, he dicho bien, enfermizas. Dentro d cincuenta o sesenta años, quizá mucho antes, habrán reventado; están enfermas desde ahora. Y también escuálidas: ¡Bonita elegancia la suya, hecha de baratijas, de sacos robados y de mimos aprendidos en el cine. Bonita generosidad esta de andar a la pesca de algunos billetes de banco grasientos en los bolsillos del amante en vez de regalarle a él, como hacen otras, perlas rosadas o ramas de coral. Esto es lo que pasa cuando se junta uno con mamarrachos pintarrajeados. ¿Y no sentían asco, ellas y tú, tú y ellas, al besuquear sus futuros esqueletos entre sábanas mal olientes?

Estúpidamente le respondí:

«¡Pero las sábanas siempre estaban limpias, Senador!»

Se enfureció:

«¡Y qué importan las sábanas! El inevitable hedor a cadáver era el suyo. Repito, ¿cómo pueden organizar orgías con gente de su clase y de la tuya?»

Yo, que ya había echado el ojo a una deliciosa *cousette* de Ventura, me ofendí:

«Pero es no se puede uno acostar sólo con altezas serenísimas».

«¿Quién habla de altezas serenísimas? Estas son carne de sepultura como las otras. Pero esto no lo puedes entender, jovencito, y hago mal al decírtelo. Es inevitable que tú y tus amigos se hundan en los mefíticos pantanos de sus inmundos placeres. Muy pocos son los que saben».

Con los ojos vueltos al techo, comenzó a sonreír; su rostro tenía una expresión de arrobamiento; después me tendió la mano y se marchó.

No lo vi en tres días; el cuarto recibí una llamada en la redacción:

«¿Monsu Corbera? Soy Bettina, el ama de llaves del Senador La Ciura. Me pidió que le dijera que tuvo un fuerte resfriado, pero que ya está mejor que desea verlo esta noche después de la cena. Venga a la calle Bertola 18, a las nueve; en el segundo piso»

La conversación, terminantemente interrumpida, se hizo inapelable.

El número 18 de la calle Bertola era un viejo palacio derruido, pero el departamento del Senador era amplio y bien decorado, supongo que gracias a la insistencia de Bettina. Desde la sala comenzaba el desfile de los libros, de esos libros de aspecto modesto y de encuadernaciones baratas de todas las bibliotecas vivas. Había miles de ellos en las tres estancias que atravesé. En la cuarta estaba sentado el senador, envuelto en una amplia bata de pelo de camello, fina y suave como nunca había visto una. Supe después que no era de camello sino que se trataba de una preciosa lana de una bestia peruana y que era un regalo del Senado Académico de Lima. El senador se cuidó de levantarse cuando entré, pero me recibió con gran cordialidad. Estaba mejor, casi del todo bien y esperaba estar en circulación en cuanto se suavizase la ola gélida que por esos días pesaba sobre Turín. Me ofreció un vino resinoso chipriota, regalo del Instituto Italiano de Atenas, unos atroces *lukums* rosa, presente de la Misión Arqueológica de Ankala, y unos dulces turineses, más racionales, comprados por la precavida Bettina. Estaba tan de buen humor que sonrió dos veces con toda la boca, y llegó, incluso, a disculparse por sus excesos en el Ades.

«Lo sé, Corbera, me he excedido en los términos, pero, créeme, he sido moderado en los conceptos. Pero pienses más en eso.»

Y, ciertamente, no pensaba ya en eso y me sentía, por el contrario, lleno de respeto por ese viejo que, sospechaba desgraciado a pesar de su triunfal carrera. Él devoraba los abominables *lukums*.

«Los dulces, Corbera, deben ser dulces y basta. Si tienen otro sabor, son como besos perversos».

Daba grandes pedazos a Eaco, un gran boxer que había entrado hacía rato.

«Este, Corbera, para quien sabe comprenderlo, se parece más a los Inmortales, a pesar de su fealdad, que tus ladronzuelas».

Se negó a enseñarme la biblioteca.

«Todas son obras clásicas, cosas que no pueden interesar a alguien como tú, moralmente reprobado en griego».

Pero me hizo dar la vuelta por la habitación en la que estábamos, la cual era también su estudio. Había pocos libros y entre ellos vi el teatro de Tirso de Molina, la *Ondina* de Lamotte-Fouqué, el drama homónimo de Giraudoux y, con sorpresa, las obras de H. G. Welles; pero en compensación en las paredes había enormes fotografías, de tamaño natural, de arcaicas estatuas griegas. Y no las acostumbradas fotografías que nosotros podemos procurarnos, sino ejemplares estupendos, evidentemente solicitados con autoridad y enviados con devoción de todos los museos del mundo. Estaban allí todas esas magníficas creaturas: el *Caballero* de Louvre, la *Diosa sentada* de Tarento, que está en Berlín, el *Guerrero* de Delfos, la *Koré* de la Acróplis, el *Apolo* de Piombino, la *Mujer Lapita* y el *Febo* de Olimpia, el celebérrimo *Auriga*... La estancia brillaba con sus sonrisas estáticas y, a la vez, irónicas y se exaltaba con la reposada soberbia de su actitud.

«Ves Corbera, éstas quizás sí, las *totinas*, no.»

Sobre la chimenea, ánforas y vasijas antiguas; Odiseo atado al mástil de la nave, las sirenas que desde lo alto de las rocas se estrellaban contra los escollos como expiación por haber dejado ir la presa.

«Patrañas, Corbera, pequeño burguesas de los poetas; nadie escapa y cuando alguno hubiese escapado, las sirenas no habrían muerto por tan poco. Por otra parte, ¿cómo hubieran hecho para morir?»

Sobre la mesita, en un modesta esquina, una vieja y descolorida fotografía; un joven veinteañero, casi desnudo, despeinados y crespos, con una expresión atrevida y líneas de rara belleza. Perplejo, me detuve un instante: creía haber comprendido. Pero estaba equivocado.

«Este, paisano, este era y es, y será (acentuó fuertemente) Rosario La Ciura.»

El pobre senador en bata había sido un joven dios.

Después hablamos de otras cosas y antes de que me fuera, me enseñó la carta en francés del Rector de la Universidad de Coimbra, quien lo invitaba a formar parte del comité de honor del congreso de estudios griegos que en mayo se llevaría a cabo en Portugal.

«Estoy muy contento; me embarcaré en Génova, en el Rex, junto a los congresistas franceses, suizos y alemanes. Como Odiseo, me taparé los oídos para no escuchar las tonterías de esos tontos, y serán unas bellas jornadas de navegación: sol, azul, olor a mar.»

Al salir pasamos de nueva cuenta frente a la estantería donde estaban las obras de Wells y tuve la osadía de manifestarle mi sorpresa de verlas ahí.

«Tienes razón, Corbera, son un horror. Hay una novelita que si lo volviese a leer, me haría escupir durante un mes seguido; y tú, perrito de salón como eres, te escandalizarías».

Después de mi vista, nuestras relaciones se tornaron decididamente cordiales; por lo menos de mi parte. Realicé elaborados tramites para que me enviaran de Génova erizos de mar bien frescos. Cuando supe que llegarían al día siguiente, me procuré vino del Etna y pan del campo y, temeroso, invité al senador a visitar mi casa. Para mi gran alivio, aceptó muy contento. Fui a recogerlo en mi Balilla y lo llevé hasta la calle Peyron que está en la casa del diablo. En el cocho tenía un poco de miedo y ninguna confianza en mi pericia como conductor.

«Te conozco, Corbera, si tenemos la desventura de encontrarnos con uno de tus adefesios con faldas, serías capaz de voltear y nos romperíamos la crisma en una esquina.»

No nos encontramos con ningún aborto en faldas digno de nota e llegamos intactos.

Por primera vez desde que lo conocía vi al senador reír: fue cuando entramos en mi recámara.

«Así que, Corbera, este es el teatro de tus sucias aventuras»

Examinó mis pocos libros.

«Bien, bien. Eres quizás menos ignorante de lo que pareces. Éste –añadió tomando mi Shakespeare–, éste algo entendía. "*A sea change into something rich and strange*." "What potions have I drunk of Siren tears?"

Cuando, en el comedor, la buena señora Carmagnola entró llevando la fuente de erizos, los limones y el resto, el senador permaneció extasiado.

«¿Cómo? ¿has pensado en esto? ¿Cómo has sabido que esto es lo que más deseo?»

«Puede comerlos seguro, senador, esta mañana todavía estaban en el mar de la Riviera.»

«Ya, ya, ustedes son siempre los mismos, con su servidumbre hacia lo decadente, hacia lo que se pudre; siempre con las largas orejas atentas a espiar los arrastrados campos de la muerte. ¡Pobres diablos! Gracias, Corbera, has sido un buen *famulus*. Lástima que estos erizos no sean del mar de allá abajo, que no esté envueltos en nuestras algas; sus espinas, desde luego, nunca han derramado sangre divina. Ciertamente has hecho cuanto era posible, pero estos son erizos casi boreales, que soñaban en las frías escolleras de Nervi o Arenzano.»

Se veía que era uno de esos sicilianos para los cuales la Rivera Ligure, región tropical para los milaneses, es una especie de Islandia. Los erizos, partidos, mostraban sus carnes heridas, sanguinolentas, extrañamente compartimentada. Nunca lo había pensado antes, pero tras las extravagantes comparaciones del senador, me parecieron realmente una disección realizada no se cual de los delicados órganos femeninos. Él los degustaba con avidez pero sin alegría, concentrado, casi compungido. No quiso ponerles limón.

«¡Ustedes siempre con sus sabores añadidos! El erizo debe saber también a limón, el azúcar también a chocolate, el amor también a paraíso.»

Al terminar bebió un sorbo de vino y cerró los ojos. Tras algunos segundos, noté que bajo los párpados marchitos resbalaban dos lágrimas. Se levantó, se acercó a la ventana y se enjuagó los ojos. Después se volvió.

«¿Has estado alguna vez en Augusta, Corbera?

Había estado tres meses de recluta; durante las horas de permiso, entre dos o tres tomábamos una barca, y nos íbamos de paseo por las trasparentes aguas de los golfos. Tras mi respuesta guardó silencio, y, después preguntó con voz irritada:

«¿Y ustedes, conscriptos, fueron alguna vez a ese golfito interior, encima de punta Izzo, detrás de la loma que domina las salinas?»

«Es el lugar más bello de Sicilia, por fortuna aún no descubierto por los paseantes. La costa es salvaje, ¿verdad senador? Completamente desierta, no se alcanza a ver ni una casa; el mar es del color de los pavo reales, y justo enfrente, más allá entre olas cambiantes, se alza el Etna. Desde ningún otro punto es tan bello como desde ahí, calmo, poderoso, de verdad divino. Es uno de esos lugares en los cuales se ve un aspecto eterno de aquella isla que tan neciamente ha vuelto la espalda a su vocación que era la de servir de pastura a los rebaños del sol».

El senador guardaba silencio. Añadió poco después:

«Eres un buen muchacho, Corbera; si no fueses tan ignorante, se habría podido hacer algo de ti».

Se acercó y me besó la frente.

«Ahora ve a prender tu carcacha. Quiero irme a casa».

Durante la semana siguiente continuamos viéndonos como de costumbre. Ahora hacíamos paseos nocturnos, en general por la Vía Po y a través de la Plaza Vittorio, íbamos a mirar el río presuroso y la colina, allá donde se colaba un poco de fantasía en el rigor geométrico de la ciudad. Comenzaba la primavera, la conmovedora estación de la juventud amenazada; en las orillas despuntaban las primeras lilas, los más impacientes de entre las parejitas sin refugio desafiaban la humedad de la hierba.

«Allá abajo el sol ya quema; las algas florecen, los peces emergen a la superficie del agua en las noches de luna y se vislumbran destellos de los cuerpos entre la espuma luminosa; nosotros estamos aquí, frente a esta corriente de agua insípida y desierta, junto a estos caseríos que parecen soldados o frailes alineado; y escuchamos los sollozos de estos agonizantes apareamientos».

Le alegraba pensar en la próxima navegación hasta Lisboa; la partida estaba ya cercana.

«Será agradable. Deberías venir también tú. Pero es una lástima que no sea una reunión para deficientes en griego; conmigo aún se puede hablar en italiano, pero si vas con Zuckmayer o Van der Voos y no demuestras conocer las optativas de todos los verbos irregulares, estarías frito; aunque quizá tú sepas más de la realidad griega que ellos, no por cultura, claro, sino por instinto animal».

Dos días antes de su partida para Génova, me dijo que al día siguiente no asistiría al café, pero que me esperaba en su casa por la noche.

El ceremonial fue el mismo de la otra vez: las imágenes de los dioses de hace tres mil años irradiaban juventud tal como una estufa irradia calor; la pálida fotografía del joven dios de hace cincuenta años parecía espantada al ver su propia metamorfosis: viejo y hundido en la poltrona.

Cuando bebíamos el vino de Chipre, el senador hizo venir a Bettina y le dijo que se podía ir a dormir.

«Acompañaré yo mismo al señor Corbera cuando se marche. Mira Corbera, si te he hecho venir aquí esta noche a riesgo de interferir con una de tus fornicaciones en Rívoli, es porque te necesito. Parto maña y cuando a mi edad uno viaja, no se sabe nunca si se quedará allá lejos para siempre; especialmente cuando se viaja por mar. ¿Sabes? yo, en el fondo te quiero: tu ingenuidad me conmueve, tus confesadas maquinaciones vitales ,e dovoerten; es más, me parece haber comprendido que tú, como pasa con algunos sicilianos de la mejor especie, has llegado a la síntesis de los sentidos y de la razón. Mereces por ello que yo no te deje en ayunas, sin haberte explicado la razón de algunas de mis extravagancias, de algunas frases que he dicho frente a ti y que ciertamente te parecerán dignas de un loco».

Protesté débilmente:

«No he comprendido muchas de las cosas dichas por usted, pero siempre atribuí la incomprensión a la insuficiencia de mi mente, nunca a una aberración suya».

«Deja Corbera, da lo mismo. Nosotros los viejos parecemos locos a ustedes los jóvenes, cuando a veces es lo contrario. Pero para explicarte, tendré que contarte mi aventura que es insólita. Ocurrió cuando era *ese señorito* de ahí –y me señaló la fotografía–. Necesitamos remontarnos a 1887, tiempo que te parecerá prehistórico, pero que para mí no lo es».

Dejó su sitio tras el escritorio y vino a sentarse a mi diván.

«Perdóname, ¿sabes? pero después tendré que hablar en voz baja. Las palabras importantes no pueden berrearse; el *grito de amor* o de odio se encuentra solamente en los melodramas o entre la gente más inculta, que son la misma cosa. En 1887 tenía veinticuatro años; mi aspecto era ese de la fotografía; tenía ya el doctorado en letras clásicas, tenía publicado dos opúsculos sobre dialectos iónicos que habían levantado cierto rumor en mi Universidad; y desde hacía un año me preparaba para concursar en la Universidad de Pavia. Por otro lado, nunca me había acercado a una mujer. A decir verdad, a una mujer, no me he acercado nunca, ni antes ni después de ese año».

Estaba seguro que mi rostro se había quedado impasible como el mármol, pero me había equivocado.

«Corbera, es muy grosero tu pestañeo: lo que digo es la verdad, verdad y también un orgullo. Sé que nosotros los de Catania pasamos por ser capaces de embarazar a nuestras propias nanas, y es cierto. En cuanto a mí, no fue así. Cuando se frecuentan, días y noches,

diosas y semidiosas como hacía yo en aquellos tiempos, quedan pocas ganas para subir las escaleras de los prostíbulos de San Berilio. Por otra parte, yo tenía entonces escrúpulos religiosos. Corbera, en verdad, tienes que aprender a controlar tus pestañas: te traicionan continuamente. Escrúpulos religiosos, he dicho, sí. Y también he dicho "entonces". Ahora ya no los tengo más, pero en este terreno no me han servido para nada.

«Tú, Corberita, que probablemente has ganado tu puesto en el periódico gracias a la tarjeta de algún jerarca, no sabes lo que es la preparación para un examen de oposición por una cátedra universitaria de literatura griega. Hay que estudiar durante dos años, hasta el límite de la demencia. La lengua, por fortuna, la conocía bastante bien, casi tan bien como la conozco ahora; y, sabes, no es por presumir... Pero el resto: ¡las variantes alejandrinas y bizantinas de los textos, los fragmentos citados, siempre mal, por los autores latinos, las innumerables conexiones de la literatura con la mitología, la historia, la filosofía, la ciencia! Es, te repito, para volverse loco. Estudiaba como un loco, y, además, daba clases a algunos suspendidos del liceo para poder pagarme el hospedaje en la ciudad. Se puede decir que me alimentaba solamente de aceitunas negras y de café. Y encima de todo esto, sobrevino la catástrofe del verano de 1887 que fue una de las verdaderamente infernales, como pasan cada tanto allá abajo. Por la noche el Etna vomitaba de nuevo el ardor del sol almacenado durante las quince horas del día; si al mediodía se tocaba una baranda de balcón se debía correr a la casa de socorro; los empedrados de lava parecían a punto de regresar al estado líquido; y el siroco, casi todos los días, te golpeaba la cara con sus alas de murciélago viscoso. Estaba por reventar. Un amigo me salvó: me encontró mientras vagaba trastornado por las calles balbuceando versos griegos que ya ni entendía. Mi aspecto lo impresionó: "Oye, Rosario, si continuas aquí, enloquecerás y adiós examen de oposición. Yo me voy a Suiza (ese muchacho tenía dinero), pero en Augusta tengo una cabaña de tres habitaciones a veinte metros del mar y muy lejos del pueblo. Lía el petate, coge tus libros y pasa allá todo el verano. Pasa a mi casa en una hora y te daré la llave. Ya verás, allá es otra cosa. En la estación pregunta dónde está el casino Carobene, lo conocen todos. Pero vete de veras, vete esta noche".

«Seguí el consejo y partí esa misma noche, y al día siguiente, al despertar, en vez de las tuberías de los retretes que desde el patio me saludaban al alba, me encontré frente a una pura extensión de mar, con el Etna al fondo, ya no despiadado, envuelto en los vapores de la mañana. El puerto estaba desierto por completo, como me has dicho que lo está hasta ahora, y era de una belleza única. La cabaña, en sus descuidadas habitaciones tenía sólo un sofá en el que había pasado la noche, una mesa y tres sillas; en la cocina algunas ollas de barro y una vieja lámpara. Tras la casa, una higuera y un pozo. Un paraíso. Fui al pueblo, busqué al campesino de Carobene, convine con él que cada dos o tres días me llevara pan, pasta, algunas verduras y un poco de petróleo. El aceite lo tenía yo, del nuestro, que me pobre madre me había mandado a Catania. Renté una barquita ligera que el pescador me llevó la misma tarde junto con una cesta y algunos anzuelos. Estaba dispuesto a permanecer ahí, por lo menos dos meses.

«Carobene tenía razón: realmente era otra cosa. El calor era violento también en Augusta pero, al no reverberar en las paredes, no producía la postración bestial, sino una suerte de serena euforia, y el sol, abandonando su gesto de verdugo, se conformaba con ser un risueño aunque brutal donador de energía, y también un mago que engastaba diamantes móviles en cada una de las más leves encrespaduras del mar. El estudio había dejado de ser una fatiga: con el ligero bamboleo de la barca en la que pasaba largas horas, cada libro parecía ya no un obstáculo para superar y sí una llave que me abría paso a un mundo del que tenía ya bajo los ojos uno de los aspectos más cautivadores. Con frecuencia me hallaba midiendo en voz alta versos de los poetas y los nombres de aquellos Dioses olvidados, ignorados por los demás, rozaban de nuevo la superficie de aquel mar que un tiempo, sólo al escucharlos, se alzaba en un tumulto o se aplacaba en bonanza.

«Mi aislamiento era absoluto, interrumpido solamente por las visitas del campesino que cada tres o cuatro días me llevaba las modestas provisiones. Se quedaba sólo cinco minutos porque al verme tan exaltado y desmelenado debía considerarme, sin duda, al borde de una peligrosa locura. Y, a decir verdad, el sol, la soledad, las noches pasadas bajo el rodar de las estrellas el silencio, el poco alimento, el estudio de argumentos remotos, mantenían a mi alrededor una suerte de encantamiento que me predisponía al prodigio.

«Éste vino a cumplirse la mañana del cinco de agosto a las seis. Me había despertado hacía poco y había saltado a la barca; pocos golpes de remo me habían alejado de los guijarros de la playa y me detuve bajo una gran roca cuya sombra me protegía del sol que ya alzaba, lleno de bella furia, y mutaba en oro y azul el candor del mar auroral. Declamaba cuando sentí un brusco descenso del borde de la barca, a la derecha, justo detrás de mí, como si alguien se hubiera agarrado para subir. Me volví y la vi: el terso rostro de una adolescente emergía del mar, y dos pequeñas manos apretaban el borde de la barca. Aquella adolescente sonreía, un ligero pliegue separaba los pálidos labios y dejaba entrever los dientes agudos y blancos, como los de los perros. Pero no era una de aquellas sonrisas como las que se ven entre ustedes, siempre bastardeadas por un expresión accesoria, de benevolencia o de ironía, de piedad o de crueldad o lo que sea: aquélla se expresaba sólo a sí misma, es decir, una casi bestial alegría de existir, un gozo casi divino. Esta sonrisa fue el primero de los sortilegios que actuaron sobre mí, revelándome paraísos de olvidada serenidad. De los desordenados cabellos color de sol, el agua del mar resbalaba sobre los ojos verdes, muy abiertos, sobre las líneas de infantil pureza.

«Nuestra recelosa razón, aunque se halla predispuesta, se rebela ante el prodigio, y cuando advierte uno, trata de apoyarse en el recuerdo de fenómenos banales. Como cualquier otro, quise creer que había encontrado a una bañista y, moviéndome con precaución, me puse a su altura, me incliné, le tendí las manos para ayudarla a salir. Pero ella, con un asombroso vigor, emergió derecha del agua hasta la cintura, me ciñó el cuello con los brazo, me envolvió en un perfume que jamás había olido, se dejó deslizar en la barca: desde la ingle para abajo, desde los glúteos, su cuerpo era el de un pez, revestido de

minúsculas escamas ambarinas y azules, y terminaba en un cola bifurcada que golpeaba, lenta, el fondo de la barca. Era una sirena.

«Tendida, apoyaba la cabeza sobre las manos cruzadas, mostraba con tranquila impudicia los delicados pelitos bajo las axilas, los senos separados, el vientre perfecto; de ella emanaba eso que yo he mal llamado un perfume, un mágico olor de mar, jovencísima voluptuosidad. Estábamos a la sombra, pero a veinte metros de nosotros la marina se abandonaba al sol y temblaba de placer. Mi desnudez casi total escondía muy mal mi emoción.

»Hablaba y así me vi cautivado, tras esa sonrisa y ese olor, por el tercero y mayor sortilegio: su voz. Era un poco gutural, velada, con resonancias de innumerables armonías; como fondo a sus palabras, en ella se vislumbraban las perezosas resacas de los mares estivales, el susurro de las últimas espumas sobre las playas, el paso de los vientos sobre las olas lunares. El canto de las Sirenas, Corbera, no existe: la música de la que no es posible escapar, no es otra que la de su voz.

»Hablaba griego y me resultaba difícil entenderla. "Te he oí hablar una lengua parecida a la mía; me gusta, tómame. Soy Ligea, soy hija de Caliópe. No creas en las fábulas inventadas sobre nosotras, no matamos a nadie, sólo amamos"

»Inclinado sobre ella, remaba, fijaba los ojos sonrientes. Llegamos a la orilla: tomé entre mis brazos su cuerpo aromático, pasamos del sol a la densa sombra; ella me infundía ya en la boca una voluptuosidad que es a sus besos terrestres, lo que el vino al agua simple.»

El senador narraba su aventura en voz baja; yo que en mi interior siempre había contrapuesto mis experiencias femeniles a las suyas, que me parecían mediocres y que de ello había sacado una tonta sensación de diminuta distancia, me hallaba humillado: también en asuntos de amores me veía abismado a insalvables distancias. En ningún momento tuve la sospecha de me estuviera contando patrañas y aún el más escéptico, que hubiera estado presente, habría notado la verdad más segura en el tono del viejo.

«Así fue como empezaron esas tres semanas. No puedo entrar en detalles, y no sería piadoso contigo si lo hiciera. Basta decir que en aquellos abrazos gozaba a la vez de la más alta forma de voluptuosidad espiritual y de aquella elemental voluptuosidad, privada de toda resonancia social, que nuestros pastores solitarios prueban cuando en los montes se unen a sus cabras; si el parangón te repugna es porque no estás en grado de comprender la trasposición necesaria del plano bestial al sobrehumano, planos, en mi caso, sobrepuestos.

»Acuérdate de cuanto Balzac no osó experimentar en *La pasión dans le désert*. De los inmortales brazos de ella brotaba tal potencia vital que la pérdida de energías eran inmediatamente compensadas, y aún acrecentadas. En esos días, Corbera, he amado como cien de sus Don Juanes juntos en toda su vida. ¡Y qué amores! Sin conventos ni delitos, ni el rencor de Comendadores, lejos de la trivialidad de los Leporello, lejos de las exigencias del corazón, de los falsos suspiros, de las delicuescencias ficticias que inevitablemente manchan sus miserables besos. Un Leporello, a decir verdad, nos turbó el primer día, y sólo

fue una vez hacia las diez el rumor de las botas del campesino sobre el sendero que llevaba al mar. Apenas tuve tiempo para cubrir con una sábana el cuerpo inusitado de Ligea, cuando ya él llegaba a la puerta: la cabeza, el cuello, sus brazos, que no estaban cubiertos, hicieron creer al Leporello que se trataba de un vulgar romance y, le inspiraron un inesperado respeto; se detuvo aún menos que lo acostumbrado al irse guiñó el ojo izquierdo y con el pulgar y el índice de la derecha, encogidos y cerrados, hizo como que se retorcía en la comisura de la boca un bigote imaginario, y se alejó sendero arriba.

»He hablado de veinte días pasados juntos; no quisiera que tú te imaginaras que durante esas tres semanas ella y yo nos hemos vivido "maritalmente", como se dice, compartiendo la cama, mesa y ocupaciones. Las ausencias de Ligea eran muy frecuentes; sin decirme nada o darme alguna señal, se zambullía en el mar y desaparecía, a veces por muchas horas. Cuando regresaba, casi siempre antes del alba, o me encontraba en la barca o en la casita, se arrastraba sobre los guijarros, mitad dentro y mitad fuera del agua, sobre el dorso, haciendo fuerzas con los brazos y llamándome para que la ayudara a subir la cuesta. "Sasá" me llamaba, porque le había dicho que este era el diminutivo de mi nombre. En este momento, entorpecida por esa parte de su cuerpo que le confería soltura en el mar, ella presentaba el lastimoso aspecto de un animal herido, aspecto que la risa de sus ojos cancelaba inmediatamente.

»Ella no comía sino cosas vivas; la veía emerger del mar, el torso delicado, brillante al sol, mientras desgarraba con los dientes un pez plateado que temblaba todavía; la sangre le bañaba el mentón y después de algunos mordiscos lanzaba a sus espaldas la merluza o la dorada destrozadas que se hundían en el agua tiñéndola de rojo, mientras ella gritaba infantilmente limpiándose los dientes con la lengua. Una vez le di vino. Le fue imposible beberlo del vaso, debí verterlo palma de su mano, pequeña y ligeramente verdosa, y ello lo bebió chasqueando la lengua como hacen los perros, mientras en los ojos se le pintaba la sorpresa producida por ese sabor desconocido. Me dijo que era bueno, pero, después, lo rechazó siempre. De vez en vez venía a la orilla con las manos llenas de ostras o de mejillones y mientras yo me afanaba en abrir las conchas con un cuchillo, ella los partía con una piedra y sorbía el molusco palpitante y algunos fragmentos de conchas de los cuales no se preocupaba.

«Te lo he dicho ya, Corbera: era una bestia, pero al mismo tiempo era también una Inmortal y es un pecado que hablando no se pueda expresar esta síntesis como, con absoluta sencillez, ella la expresaba en su propio cuerpo. No solo en el acto carnal ella manifestaba una alegría y una delicadeza opuesta a la oscura lujuria animal, su hablar era de una inmediatez potente que sólo he encontrado en algunos grandes poetas. No se es hija de Calíope por nada: en la oscuridad de todas las cultura, ignorante de toda sabiduría, desdeñosa de cualquier constricción moral, ella formaba parte aún del manantial de cada cultura, de cada sabiduría, de toda ética y sabía expresar ésta su primigenia superioridad en términos de áspera belleza. "Soy todo porque soy solo una corriente de vida sin accidentes; soy inmortal porque todas las muertes concluyen en mi desde aquella merluza de hace un

instante a la de Zeus; y en mí se reúnen y devienen en vida nuevamente, ya no individual y determinada, mas sí pánica y libre". Después agregaba: "Tú eres bello y joven; deberías seguirme ahora al mar y protegerte de los dolores de la vejez; verías mi morada, bajo los altos montes de agua quieta y oscura, donde todo es silenciosa quietud, tan natural que quien la posee ni siquiera la advierte. Yo te he amado y, recuérdalo, cuando estés cansado, cuando ya no puedas más, tendrás que asomarte al mar y llamarme: yo estaré siempre ahí, porque estoy dondequiera, y tu sed de sueños será saciada."»

«Me contaba sobre su existencia bajo el mar, sobre los Tritones barbados, de las glaucas grutas, pero también me decía que éstas eran fatuas apariencias y que la verdad estaba mucho más al fondo, en el ciego y mudo palacio de aguas informes, eternas, sin resplandor, sin susurros.

«Una vez me dijo que se ausentaría hasta la noche del día siguiente. "Debo ir muy lejos, allá donde sé que encontraré un don para ti."»

Volvió de hecho con un estupendo ramo de coral purpúreo incrustado de conchas y mohos marinos. Lo he conservado todo este tiempo en un cajón y cada noche besaba esos sitios sobre los cuales recordaba que se habían posado los dedos de la Indiferente, es decir de la Bienhechora. Un día después María, el ama de llaves que precedió a Bettina, lo robó para dárselo a su querido, Lo recuperé más tarde en casa de un joyero de Ponte Vecchio, profanado, pulido y lijado al punto de ser casi irreconocible. Lo compré y por la noche lo tiré al Arno: había pasado por demasiadas manos profanas.

«Me hablaba también de no pocos amantes humanos que ella había tenido durante su adolescencia milenaria: pescadores, marinos griegos, sicilianos, árabes, capriotas, también algunos náufragos a la deriva sobre restos podridos, a los que ella se les había aparecido por un instante entre los relámpagos de la tempestad para cambiar en placer su último estertor. "Todos han seguido mi invitación, han venido a encontrarme, algunos de inmediato, otros transcurrido lo que para ellos era mucho tiempo. Sólo uno no se dejó ver más: era un bello muchacho de piel blanquísima y cabellos rojos, con el que me uní en una playa lejana, allá donde nuestro mar se confunde con el gran Océano; olía a algo más fuerte que el vino que me has dado el otro día. Creo que no se ha hecho ver, no porque sea feliz, sino porque cuando nos encontramos estaba tan borracho que no comprendía nada; le habré parecido una de tantas pescadoras.

«Esas semanas en pleno verano transcurrieron rápidas como una sola mañana; cuando pasaron descubrí que en realidad había vivido siglos. Esa muchacha lasciva, esa agreste y cruel había sido también Madre sapientísima que con su sola presencia había desarraigado creencias, disipado metafísicas; con los frágiles dedos, con frecuencia ensangrentados, me había mostrado el camino hacia los verdaderos y eternos reposos, también hacia un ascetismo de vida derivado no de la renuncia, mas si de la imposibilidad de aceptar otros placeres inferiores. No seré yo, ciertamente, el segundo en no obedecer su reclamo, no rechazaré esta especie de Gracia pagana que me ha sido concedida.

«Por causa de su propia violencia, ese verano fue breve. Un poco después del veinte de agosto se reunieron las primeras, tímidas nubes, llovió alguna gota aislada, tibias como la sangre. Las noches fueron toda una sucesión, sobre el lejano horizonte, de lentos, mudos relampagueos que se encadenaban el uno del otro como las meditaciones de un dios. Por la mañana el mar color de tórtola como una tórtola se dolía por sus arcanas inquietudes y por la noche se encrespaba sin que se levantara brisa, en una gradación de gris humo al gris acero y al gris perla, muy suaves todos y más afectuosos que el esplendor que los precedía. Lejanísimos jirones de niebla rozaban las aguas: quizá sobre las costas griegas llovía ya. También el humor de Ligea palidecía desde el esplendor al afectuoso tono del gris. Callaba más horas acostada sobre un escollo mirando el horizonte, ya no inmóvil, se alejaba un poco. "Quiero quedarme aún contigo; si ahora me fuese mis compañeros del mar me retendrían. ¿Los oyes? Me llaman" A veces me parecía en verdad oír una nota diferente, más baja entre grito agudo de las gaviotas, entrever fugaces desenfrenos entre los escollos. "Suenan sus conchas, llaman Ligea para la fiesta de la tempestad".

«Ésta nos asaltó al alba del día veintiséis. Desde los escollos vimos acercarse al viento revolvía las aguas lejanas, cerca de nosotros las olas plomizas se hinchaban de nuevo grandes y perezosas. La ráfaga no tardó en alcanzarnos, nos silbó en las orejas, dobló los romeros secos. El mar debajo de nosotros se rompió, la primera ola avanzó cubierta de blancura. "Adios Sasá. No olvidarás". La oleada se estrelló contra el escollo, la Sirena se lanzó al irisado borboteo; no la vi caer; me pareció que se deshacía en la espuma.

El senador partió al día siguiente por la mañana: fui a la estación para despedirlo. Estaba hosco y cortante como siempre, pero cuando el tren comenzó a moverse, sus dedos rozaron mi cabeza desde la ventanilla.

Un día después, al alba, llamaron de Génova al periódico: durante la noche el senador La Ciura había caído al mar desde la cubierta del *Rex* que navegaba hacia Nápoles, y aunque de inmediato se echaron botes al mar, su cuerpo no fue encontrado.

Una semana más tarde fue abierto su testamento: a Bettina le dejaba el dinero en el banco y sus muebles; la biblioteca era heredada a la Universidad de Catania; en un codicilo de fecha reciente yo era nombrado como legatario de la cratera griega con las figuras de las Sirenas y de la gran fotografía de Koré de la Acrópolis.

Los dos objetos fueron enviados a mi casa en Palermo. Después vino la guerra y mientras yo estaba en Marmarica con medio litro de agua al día, los *liberators* destruyeron mi casa. Cuando volví, la fotografía había sido cortada en tiras que habían servido como antorchas a los saqueadores nocturnos. La cratera había sido hecha pedazos; En el fragmento más grueso se ven los pies de Ulises amarrado al árbol de la nave. Lo conservo todavía. Los libros fueron depositados en el sótano de la Universidad y, como falta fondos para las estanterías, se van pudriendo lentamente.

[1] Pasado inmediato de los verbos griegos (n t)

[2] Nombre de una cadena de montañas en Sicilia.

zoom

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa
La sirena

Feltrinelli

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

La sirena

Feltrinelli

La sirena

Nel tardo autunno di quell'anno 1938 mi trovavo in piena crisi di misantropia. Risiedevo a Torino e la "tota" n. 1, frugando nelle mie tasche alla ricerca di un qualche biglietto da cinquanta lire, aveva, mentre dormivo, scoperto anche una letterina della "tota" n. 2 che pur attraverso scorrettezze ortografiche non lasciava dubbi circa la natura delle nostre relazioni.

Il mio risveglio era stato immediato e burrascoso. L'alloggetto di via Peyron echeggiò di escandescenze vernacole; per cavarmi gli occhi venne anche fatto un tentativo che potei mandare a vuoto soltanto storcendo un poco il polso sinistro della cara figliuola. Quest'azione di difesa pienamente giustificata pose fine alla scenata ma anche all'idillio. La ragazza si rivestì in fretta, ficcò nella borsetta piumino, rossetto, fazzolettino, il biglietto da cinquanta "causa mali tanti", mi scaraventò sul viso un triplice "pourcoun!" e se ne andò. Mai era stata carina quanto in quel quarto d'ora di furia. Dalla finestra la vidi uscire e allontanarsi nella nebbiolina del mattino, alta, slanciata, adorna di riconquistata eleganza.

Non la ho vista mai più come non ho più rivisto un "pullover" di cashmere nero che mi era costato un occhio e che aveva il funesto pregio di una foggia adatta tanto a maschi quanto a femmine. Essa lasciò soltanto, sul letto, due di quelle forcinette attorcigliate, dette "invisibili".

Lo stesso pomeriggio avevo un appuntamento con la n. 2 in una pasticceria di piazza Carlo Felice. Al tavolinetto rotondo nell'angolo ovest della seconda sala che era il "nostro" non vidi le chiome castane della fanciulla più che mai desiderata ma la faccia furbesca di Tonino, un suo fratello di dodici anni che aveva appena finito di inghiottire una cioccolata con doppia panna. Quando mi avvicinai si alzò con la consueta urbanità torinese. "Monsù," mi disse, "la Pinotta non verrà; mi ha detto di darle questo biglietto. Cerea, monsù." E uscì portando via due "brioches" rimaste nel piatto. Col cartoncino color avorio mi si notificava un congedo assoluto, motivato dalla mia infamia e "disonestà meridionale". Era chiaro che la n. 1 aveva rintracciato e sobillato la n. 2 e che io ero rimasto seduto fra due sedie.

In dodici ore avevo perduto due ragazze utilmente complementari fra loro più un "pullover" al quale tenevo; avevo anche dovuto pagare le consumazioni dell'infernale Tonino. Il mio sicilianissimo amor proprio era umiliato: ero stato fatto fesso; e decisi di abbandonare per qualche tempo il mondo e le sue pompe.

Per questo periodo di ritiro non poteva trovarsi luogo più acconcio di quel caffè di via Po dove adesso, solo come un cane, mi recavo ad ogni momento libero e, sempre, la sera dopo il mio lavoro al giornale. Era una specie di Ade popolato da esangui ombre di tenenti colonnelli, magistrati e professori in pensione. Queste vane apparenze giocavano a dama o a domino, immerse in una luce oscurata il giorno dai portici e dalle nuvole, la sera dagli enormi paralumi verdi dei lampadari; e non alzavano mai la voce timorosi com'erano che un suono troppo forte avrebbe fatto scomporsi la debole trama della loro apparenza. Un adattissimo Limbo.

Come l'animale abitudinario che sono, sedevo sempre al medesimo tavolino d'angolo accuratamente disegnato per offrire il massimo incomodo possibile al cliente. Alla mia sinistra due spettri d'ufficiali superiori giocavano a "tric-trac" con due larve di consiglieri di corte d'appello; i dadi militari e giudiziari scivolavano atoni fuori dal bicchiere di cuoio. Alla mia destra sedeva sempre un signore di età molto avanzata, infagottato in un cappotto vecchio con colletto di un astrakan spelacchiato. Leggeva senza tregua riviste straniere, fumava sigari toscani e sputava spesso; ogni tanto chiudeva le riviste, sembrava inseguire nelle volute di fumo un qualche suo ricordo. Dopo, ricominciava a leggere ed a sputare. Aveva bruttissime mani, nocchierute, rossastre con le unghie tagliate dritte e non sempre pulite, ma una volta che in una delle sue riviste s'imbatté nella fotografia d'una statua greca arcaica, di quelle con gli occhi lontani dal naso e col sorriso ambiguo, mi sorpresi vedendo che i suoi deformi polpastrelli accarezzavano l'immagine con una delicatezza addirittura regale. Si accorse che lo avevo visto, grugnì di furore e ordinò un secondo espresso.

Le nostre relazioni sarebbero rimaste su quel piano di latente ostilità non fosse stato un fortunato incidente. Io portavo con me dalla redazione cinque o sei quotidiani, fra essi, una volta, il "Giornale di Sicilia". Erano gli anni nei quali il Minculpop più infieriva, e tutti i giornali erano identici; quel numero del quotidiano palermitano era più banale che mai e non si distingueva da un giornale di Milano e di Roma se non per la imperfezione tipografica; la mia lettura di esso fu quindi breve e presto abbandonai il foglio sul tavolino. Avevo appena iniziato la contemplazione di un'altra incarnazione del Minculpop quando il mio vicino mi indirizzò la parola: "Mi scusi, signore, Le dispiacerebbe se dessi una scorsa a questo suo 'Giornale di Sicilia'? Sono siciliano e da venti anni non mi capita di vedere un giornale delle mie parti". La voce era quanto mai coltivata, l'accento impeccabile; gli occhi grigi del vecchio mi guardavano con profondo distacco. "Prego, faccia pure. Sa, sono siciliano anch'io, se lo desidera mi è facile portare qui il giornale ogni sera." "Grazie, non credo sia necessario; la mia è una semplice curiosità fisica. Se la Sicilia è ancora come ai tempi miei, immagino che non vi succede mai niente di buono, come da tremila anni."

Leggiucchiò il foglio, lo ripiegò, me lo restituì e s'ingolfò nella lettura di un opuscolo. Quando se ne andò voleva evidentemente svignarsela senza salutare ma io mi alzai e mi presentai; mormorò fra i denti il proprio nome che non compresi; ma non mi tese la mano; sulla soglia del caffè, però, si voltò, alzò il cappello e gridò forte: "Ciao, paesano". Scomparve sotto i portici lasciandomi sbalordito e provocando gemiti di

disapprovazione fra le ombre che giocavano.

Compii i riti magici atti a far materializzare un cameriere e gli chiesi mostrando il tavolo vuoto: “Chi era quel signore?”. “Chiel,” rispose. “Chiel l’è ’l senatour Rosario La Ciura.”

Il nome diceva molto anche alla mia lacunosa cultura giornalistica: era quello di uno dei cinque o sei italiani che posseggono una reputazione universale e indiscussa, quello del più illustre ellenista dei nostri tempi. Mi spiegai le corpulente riviste e l’incisione accarezzata; anche la scontrosità ed anche la raffinatezza celata.

L’indomani, al giornale, frugai in quel singolare schedario che contiene i necrologi ancora “in spe”. La scheda “La Ciura” era lì, passabilmente redatta, una volta tanto. Vi si diceva come il grand’uomo fosse nato ad Aci-Castello (Catania) in una povera famiglia della piccola borghesia, come mercé una stupefacente attitudine allo studio del greco ed a forza di borse di studio e pubblicazioni erudite avesse ottenuto a ventisette anni la cattedra di letteratura greca all’Università di Pavia; come poi fosse stato chiamato a quella di Torino dove era rimasto sino al compimento dei limiti di età; aveva tenuto dei corsi a Oxford e a Tübingen e compiuto molti viaggi anche lunghi perché, senatore pre-fascista e accademico dei Lincei, era anche dottore “honoris causa” a Yale, Harvard, Nuova Delhi e Tokio oltre che, s’intende, delle più illustri università europee da Upsala a Salamanca. L’elenco delle sue pubblicazioni era lunghissimo e molte sue opere, specie sui dialetti ionici, erano reputate fondamentali; basti dire che aveva ricevuto l’incarico, unico straniero, di curare l’edizione teubneriana di Esiodo cui aveva premesso una introduzione latina d’insorpassata profondità scientifica; infine, gloria massima, non era membro dell’Accademia d’Italia. Ciò che lo aveva sempre distinto dagli altri pur eruditissimi colleghi era il senso vivace, quasi carnale, dell’antichità classica e ciò si era manifestato in una raccolta di saggi italiani *Uomini e dei* che era stata stimata opera non soltanto di alta erudizione ma di viva poesia. Insomma era “l’onore di una nazione e un faro di tutte le colture”, così concludeva il compilatore della scheda. Aveva settantacinque anni e viveva lontano dall’opulenza ma decorosamente con la sua pensione e l’indennità senatoriale. Era celibe.

È inutile negarlo: noi italiani figli (o padri) di primo letto del Rinascimento stimiamo il Grande Umanista superiore a qualsiasi altro essere umano. La possibilità di trovarmi adesso in quotidiana prossimità del più alto rappresentante di questa sapienza delicata, quasi necromantica e poco redditizia, mi lusingava e turbava; provavo le medesime sensazioni di un giovane statunitense che venga presentato al signor Gillette; timore, rispetto e una forma particolare di non ignobile invidia.

La sera discesi al Limbo in uno spirito ben diverso dei giorni precedenti. Il senatore era già al suo posto e rispose al mio saluto reverenziale con un borbottio appena percettibile. Quando però ebbe finito di leggere un articolo e di completare alcuni appunti su una sua agendina, si voltò verso di me e con la voce stranamente musicale: “Paesano,” mi disse, “dai modi come mi hai salutato mi sono accorto che qualcuna di queste larve qui ti ha detto chi sono. Dimenticalo e, se non lo hai già fatto, dimentica anche gli aoristi studiati al liceo. Dimmi piuttosto come ti chiami perché ieri sera hai fatto la solita presentazione farfugliata ed io non ho, come te, la risorsa di chiedere il tuo nome ad altri, perché qui, certo, nessuno ti conosce”.

Parlava con insolente distacco; si avvertiva che io ero per lui assai meno di uno scarafaggio, una specie di quelle bricioluzze di pulviscolo che roteano senza costrutto nei raggi del sole. Però la voce pacata, la parola precisa, il “tu”, davano la sensazione di serenità di un dialogo platonico.

“Mi chiamo Paolo Corbèra, sono nato a Palermo, dove mi sono laureato in legge; adesso lavoro qui alla redazione della ‘Stampa’. Per rassicurarla, senatore, aggiungerò che alla licenza liceale ho avuto ‘cinque più’ in greco, e che ho motivo di ritenere che il ‘più’ sia stato aggiunto proprio per poter darmi il diploma.”

Sorrise di mezza bocca. “Grazie di avermelo detto, meglio così. Detesto di parlare con gente che crede di sapere mentre invece ignora, come i miei colleghi all’Università; in fondo in fondo non conoscono che le forme esteriori del greco, le sue stramberie e difformità. Lo spirito vivo di questa lingua scioccamente chiamata ‘morta’ non è stato loro rivelato. Nulla è stato loro rivelato, d’altronde. Povera gente, del resto: come potrebbero avvertirlo questo spirito se non hanno mai avuto occasione di sentirlo, il greco?”

L’orgoglio sì, va bene, è preferibile alla falsa modestia; ma a me sembrava che il senatore esagerasse; mi balenò anche l’idea che gli anni fossero riusciti a rammorbidire alquanto quel cervello eccezionale. Quei poveri diavoli dei suoi colleghi avevano avuto l’occasione di udire il greco antico proprio quanto lui, cioè mai.

Lui proseguiva: “Paolo... Sei fortunato di chiamarti come il solo apostolo che avesse un po’ di cultura e una qualche infarinatura di buone lettere. Girolamo però sarebbe stato meglio. Gli altri nomi che voi cristiani portate in giro sono veramente troppo vili. Nomi da schiavi”.

Continuava a deludermi; sembrava davvero il solito mangiapreti accademico con in più un pizzico di nietzscheismo fascista. Era mai possibile?

Continuava a parlare con l’avvincente modulazione della sua voce e con la foga di chi, forse, era stato molto tempo in silenzio. “Corbèra... M’inganno o non è questo un grande nome siciliano? Ricordo che mio padre pagava per la nostra casa di Aci-Castello un piccolo canone annuo all’amministrazione di una casa Corbèra di Palina o Salina, non ricordo più bene. Anzi ogni volta scherzava e diceva che se al mondo vi era una cosa sicura era che quelle poche lire non sarebbero finite nelle tasche del ‘domino diretto’, come diceva lui. Ma tu sei proprio uno di quei Corbèra o soltanto il discendente di un qualche contadino che ha preso il nome del signore?”

Confessai che ero proprio un Corbèra di Salina, anzi il solo esemplare superstite di questa famiglia: tutti i fasti, tutti i peccati, tutti i canoni inesatti, tutti i pesi non pagati, tutte le Gattoparderie insomma erano concentrate in me solo. Paradossalmente il senatore sembrò contento.

"Bene, bene. Io ho molta considerazione per le vecchie famiglie. Esse posseggono una memoria, minuscola è vero, ma ad ogni modo maggiore delle altre. Sono quanto di meglio, voialtri, possiate raggiungere in fatto d'immortalità fisica. Pensa a sposarti presto, Corbèra, dato che voialtri non avete trovato nulla di meglio, per sopravvivere, che il disperdere la vostra semente nei posti più strani."

Decisamente, mi spazientiva. "Voialtri, voialtri." Chi voialtri? Tutto il vile gregge che non aveva la fortuna di essere il senatore La Ciura? E lui la conseguiva l'immortalità fisica? Non si sarebbe detto a guardare il volto rugoso, il corpo pesante...

"Corbèra di Salina," continuava imperterrito. "Non ti offenderai se continuo a darti del 'tu' come a uno dei miei studentelli che, un istante, sono giovani?"

Mi professai non solo onorato ma lieto, come infatti ero. Superate ormai le questioni di nomi e di protocollo, si parlò della Sicilia. Lui erano venti anni che non ci metteva piede e l'ultima volta che era stato laggiù (così diceva, al modo piemontese) vi era rimasto soltanto cinque giorni, a Siracusa, per discutere con Paolo Orsi alcune quistioni circa l'alternarsi dei semicori nelle rappresentazioni classiche. "Ricordo che mi hanno voluto portare in macchina da Catania a Siracusa; ho accettato solo quando ho appreso che ad Augusta la strada passa lontano dal mare, mentre la ferrovia è sul litorale. Raccontami della nostra isola; è una bella terra benché popolata da somari. Gli Dei vi hanno soggiornato, forse negli Agosti inesauribili vi soggiornano ancora. Non parlarmi però di quei quattro templi recentissimi che avete, tanto non ne capisci niente, ne sono sicuro."

Così parlammo della Sicilia eterna, di quella delle cose di natura; del profumo di rosmarino sui Nèbrodi, del gusto del miele di Melilli, dell'ondeggiare delle messi in una giornata ventosa di Maggio come si vede da Enna, delle solitudini intorno a Siracusa, delle raffiche di profumo riversate, si dice, su Palermo dagli agrumeti durante certi tramonti di Giugno. Parlammo dell'incanto di certe notti estive in vista del golfo di Castellammare, quando le stelle si specchiano nel mare che dorme e lo spirito di chi è coricato riverso fra i lentischi si perde nel vortice del cielo mentre il corpo, teso e all'erta, teme l'avvicinarsi dei demoni.

Dopo un'assenza quasi totale di cinquanta anni il senatore conservava un ricordo singolarmente preciso di alcuni fatti minimi. "Il mare: il mare di Sicilia è il più colorito, il più aromatico di quanti ne abbia visti; sarà la sola cosa che non riuscirete a guastare, fuori delle città, s'intende. Nelle trattorie a mare si servono ancora i 'rizzi' spinosi spaccati a metà?" Lo rassicurai aggiungendo però che pochi li mangiano adesso, per timore del tifo. "Eppure sono la più bella cosa che avete laggiù, quelle cartilagini sanguigne, quei simulacri di organi femminili, profumati di sale e di alghe. Che tifo e tifo! Saranno pericolosi come tutti i doni del mare che dà la morte insieme all'immortalità. A Siracusa li ho perentoriamente richiesti a Orsi. Che sapore, che aspetto divino! Il più bel ricordo dei miei ultimi cinquanta anni!"

Ero confuso ed affascinato; un uomo simile che si abbandonasse a metafore quasi oscene, che esibiva una golosità infantile per le, dopo tutto mediocri, delizie dei ricci di mare!

Parlammo ancora a lungo e lui, quando se ne andò, tenne a pagarmi l'espresso, non senza manifestare la sua singolare rozzezza ("Si sa, questi ragazzi di buona famiglia non hanno mai un soldo in tasca"), e ci separammo amici se non si vogliono considerare i cinquanta anni che dividevano le nostre età e le migliaia di anni luce che separavano le nostre culture.

Continuammo ad incontrarci ogni sera e, benché il fumo del mio furore contro l'umanità cominciasse a dissiparsi, mi facevo un dovere di non mancare mai d'incontrare il senatore negli Inferi di via Po; non che si chiacchierasse molto: lui continuava a leggere e a prendere appunti e mi rivolgeva la parola solo di tanto in tanto, ma quando parlava era sempre un armonioso fluire di orgoglio e insolenza, misto a allusioni disparate, a venature d'incomprensibile poesia. Continuava anche a sputare e finii col notare che lo faceva soltanto mentre leggeva.[1] Credo che anche lui si fosse preso di un certo affetto per me, ma non mi faccio illusioni: se affetto c'era non era quello che uno di "noialtri" (per adoperare la terminologia del senatore) può risentire per un essere umano, ma piuttosto era simile a quello che una vecchia zitella può provare verso il proprio cardellino del quale conosce la fatuità e l'incomprensività ma la cui esistenza le permette di esprimere ad alta voce rimpianti nei quali la bestiola non ha parte alcuna: però se questa non ci fosse essa risentirebbe un malessere. Cominciai a notare, infatti, che quando tardavo gli occhi alteri del vecchio erano fissi alla porta d'ingresso.

Ci volle circa un mese perché dalle considerazioni, originalissime sempre ma generiche da parte di lui, si passasse agli argomenti indiscreti che sono poi i soli a distinguere le conversazioni fra amici da quelle fra semplici conoscenze. Fui io stesso a prendere l'iniziativa. Quel suo sputare frequente m'infastidiva (aveva infastidito anche i custodi dell'Ade che finirono col porre vicino al suo posto una sputacchiera di tersissimo ottone) cosicché una sera ardii chiedergli perché non si facesse curare di questo suo insistente catarro. Feci la domanda senza riflettere, mi pentii subito di averla arrischiata e aspettavo che l'ira senatoriale facesse crollare sul mio capo gli stucchi del soffitto. Invece la voce ben timbrata mi rispose pacata: "Ma, caro Corbèra, io non ho nessun catarro. Tu che osservi con tanta cura avresti dovuto notare che non tossisco mai prima di sputare. Il mio sputo non è segno di malattia anzi lo è di salute mentale: sputo per disgusto delle sciocchezze che vo leggendo; se ti vorrai dare la pena di esaminare quell'arnese lì (e mostrava la sputacchiera) ti accorgerai che

esso custodisce pochissima saliva e nessuna traccia di muco. I miei sputi sono simbolici e altamente culturali; se non ti garbano ritorna ai tuoi salotti natii dove non si sputa soltanto perché non ci si vuol nauseare mai di niente". La straordinaria insolenza era attenuata soltanto dallo sguardo lontano, nondimeno mi venne voglia di alzarmi e di piantarlo lì; per fortuna ebbi il tempo di riflettere che la colpa stava nella mia avventatezza. Rimasi, e l'impassibile senatore passò subito al contrattacco. "E tu, poi, perché frequenti questo Erebo pieno di ombre e, come dici, di catarri, questo luogo geometrico di vite fallite? A Torino non mancano quelle creature che a voialtri sembrano tanto desiderabili. Una gita all'albergo del Castello, a Rivoli o a Moncalieri allo stabilimento di bagni e il vostro sudicio sollazzo sarebbe presto realizzato." Mi misi a ridere sentendo da una bocca tanto sapiente informazioni così esatte sui luoghi di piacere torinesi. "Ma come fa Lei a conoscere questi indirizzi, senatore?" "Li conosco, Corbèra, li conosco. Frequentando i Senati Accademici e politici si apprende questo, e questo soltanto. Mi farai però la grazia di esser convinto che i sordidi piaceri di voialtri non sono mai stati roba per Rosario La Ciura." Si sentiva che era vero: nel contegno, nelle parole del senatore vi era il segno inequivocabile (come si diceva nel 1938) di un riserbo sessuale che non aveva nulla da fare con l'età. "La verità, senatore, è che ho cominciato a venir qui appunto come in un temporaneo asilo lontano dal mondo. Ho avuto dei guai proprio con due di queste ragazze da Lei tanto giustamente stigmatizzate." La risposta fu fulminea e spietata. "Corna, eh, Corbèra? oppure malattie?" "Nessuna delle due cose: peggio: abbandono." E gli narrai i ridicoli avvenimenti di due mesi prima. Li narrai in modo lepido perché l'ulcera al mio amor proprio si era cicatrizzata; qualsiasi persona che non fosse stato quell'ellenista della malora mi avrebbe o preso in giro o, eccezionalmente, compatito. Ma il temibile vecchio non fece né l'uno né l'altro: s'indignò, invece. "Ecco che cosa succede, Corbèra, quando ci si accoppia fra esseri ammalati e squallidi. Lo stesso del resto direi alle due sgualdrinelle parlando di te, se avessi il disgusto d'incontrarle." "Ammalate, senatore? Stavano d'incanto tutte e due; bisognava vederle come mangiavano quando si pranzava agli Specchi; e squallide poi, no: erano pezzi di figliuole magnifiche, ed eleganti anche." Il senatore sibilò uno dei suoi sputi sdegnosi. "Ammalate, ho detto bene, ammalate; fra cinquanta, sessanta anni, forse molto prima, creperanno; quindi sono fin da ora ammalate. E squallide anche: bella eleganza, quella loro, fatta di cianfrusaglie, di 'pullover' rubati e di moinette apprese al cinema. Bella generosità quella loro di andare a pesca di bigliettucci di banca untuosi nelle tasche dell'amante invece di regalare a lui, come altre fanno, perle rosate e rami di corallo. Ecco che cosa succede quando ci si mette con questi sgorbietti truccati. E non avevate ribrezzo, loro quanto te, te quanto loro, a sbaciucchiare queste vostre future carcasse fra maleodoranti lenzuola?" Risposi stupidamente: "Ma le lenzuola erano sempre pulitissime, senatore!". S'infuriò. "E che c'entrano le lenzuola? L'inevitabile lezzo di cadavere era il vostro. Ripeto, come fate a intrecciar bagordi con gente della loro, della tua risma?" Io che avevo di già adocchiato una deliziosa "cousette" di Ventura, mi offesi. "Ma insomma non si può mica andare a letto soltanto con delle Altezze Serenissime!" "Chi ti parla di Altezze Serenissime? Queste sono materiale da carnaio come le altre. Ma questo non lo puoi capire, giovanotto, ho torto io a dirtelo. È fatale che tu e le tue amiche v'inoltriate nelle mefitiche paludi dei vostri piaceri immondi. Pochissimi sono coloro che sanno." Con gli occhi rivolti al soffitto si mise a sorridere; il suo volto aveva un'espressione rapita; poi mi tese la mano e se ne andò.

Non si vide durante tre giorni; il quarto mi giunse una telefonata in redazione. "L'è monsù Corbèra? Io sono la Bettina, la governante del signor senatore La Ciura. Le fa dire che ha avuto un forte raffreddore, che adesso sta meglio e che vuol vederla stasera dopo cena. Venga in via Bertola 18, alle nove; al secondo piano." La comunicazione, perentoriamente interrotta, divenne inappellabile.

Il numero 18 di via Bertola era un vecchio palazzo malandato, ma l'appartamento del senatore era vasto e ben tenuto, suppongo mercé le insistenze della Bettina. Fin dalla sala d'ingresso cominciava la sfilata dei libri, di quei libri di aspetto modesto e di economica rilegatura di tutte le biblioteche vive. Ve ne erano migliaia nelle tre stanze che attraversai. Nella quarta sedeva il senatore avvolto in un'amplissima veste da camera di pelo di cammello, fine e soffice come non ne avevo mai viste. Seppi poi che non di cammello si trattava ma di preziosa lana di una bestia peruviana e che era un dono del Senato Accademico di Lima. Il senatore si guardò bene dall'alzarsi quando entrai ma mi accolse con cordialità grande; stava meglio, anzi del tutto bene, e contava rimettersi in circolazione non appena l'ondata di gelo che in quei giorni pesava su Torino si fosse mitigata. Mi offrì del vino resinoso cipriota, dono dell'Istituto Italiano di Atene, degli atroci "lukum" rosa, offerti dalla Missione Archeologica di Ankara, e dei più razionali dolci torinesi acquistati dalla previdente Bettina. Era tanto di buon umore che sorrise ben due volte con tutta la bocca e che giunse perfino a scusarsi delle proprie escandescenze nell'Ade. "Lo so, Corbèra, sono stato eccessivo nei termini per quanto, credimi, moderato nei concetti. Non ci pensare più." Non vi pensavo davvero anzi mi sentivo pieno di rispetto per quel vecchio che sospettavo di essere quanto mai infelice malgrado la sua carriera trionfale. Lui divorava gli abominevoli "lukum". "I dolci, Corbèra, debbono essere dolci e basta. Se hanno anche un altro sapore sono come dei baci perversi." Dava larghe briciole ad Eaco, un grande "boxer" che era entrato a un certo punto. "Questo, Corbèra, per chi sa comprenderlo, rassomiglia più agl'Immortali, malgrado la sua bruttezza, delle tue sgrinfiette." Rifiutò di farmi vedere la biblioteca. "Tutta roba classica che non può interessare uno come te, moralmente bocciato in greco." Ma mi fece fare il giro della stanza nella quale eravamo che era poi il suo studio. Vi erano pochi libri e fra essi notai il Teatro di Tirso de Molina, la *Undine* di La Motte Fouqué, il dramma omonimo di Giraudoux e, con mia sorpresa, le opere di H.G. Wells; ma in compenso alle pareti vi

erano enormi fotografie, a grandezza naturale, di statue greche arcaiche; e non le solite fotografie che tutti noi possiamo procurarci ma esemplari stupendi evidentemente richiesti con autorità ed inviati con devozione dai musei di tutto il mondo. Vi erano tutte, quelle magnifiche creature: il "Cavaliere" del Louvre, la "Dea seduta" di Taranto che è a Berlino, il "Guerriero" di Delfi, la "Core" dell'Acropoli, l'"Apollo" di Piombino, la "Donna Lapita" e il "Febo" di Olimpia, il celeberrimo "Auriga"... La stanza balenava dei loro sorrisi estatici ed insieme ironici, si esaltava nella riposata alterigia del loro portamento. "Vedi, Corbèra, queste sì, magari; le 'totine', no." Sul caminetto anfore e crateri antichi: Odisseo legato all'albero della nave, le Sirene che dall'alto della rupe si sfracellavano sugli scogli in espiazione di aver lasciato sfuggire la preda. "Frottole queste, Corbèra, frottole piccolo-borghesi dei poeti; nessuno sfugge e quand'anche qualcuno fosse scampato le Sirene non sarebbero morte per così poco. Del resto come avrebbero fatto a morire?"

Su di un tavolino, in una modesta cornice, una fotografia vecchia e sbiadita; un giovane ventenne, quasi nudo, dai ricci capelli scomposti, con una espressione baldanzosa sui lineamenti di rara bellezza. Perplesso, mi fermai un istante: credevo di aver capito. Niente affatto. "E questo, paesano, questo era ed è, e sarà (accentuò fortemente) Rosario La Ciura."

Il povero senatore in veste da camera era stato un giovane dio.

Poi parlammo d'altro e prima che me ne andassi mi mostrò una lettera in francese del Rettore dell'Università di Coimbra che lo invitava a far parte del comitato d'onore nel congresso di studi greci che in Maggio si sarebbe svolto in Portogallo. "Sono molto contento; m'imbarcherò a Genova sul *Rex* insieme ai congressisti francesi, svizzeri e tedeschi. Come Odisseo mi turerò le orecchie per non sentire le fandonie di quei minorati, e saranno belle giornate di navigazione: sole, azzurro, odor di mare."

Uscendo ripassammo davanti allo scaffale nel quale stavano le opere di Wells e osai sorprendermi di vederle lì. "Hai ragione, Corbèra, sono un orrore. Vi è poi un romanzetto che se lo rileggessi mi farebbe venir la voglia di sputare per un mese di fila; e tu, cagnolino da salotto come sei, te ne scandalizzeresti."

Dopo questa mia visita le nostre relazioni divennero decisamente cordiali; da parte mia, per lo meno. Feci elaborati preparativi per far venire da Genova dei ricci di mare ben freschi. Quando seppi che essi sarebbero arrivati l'indomani mi procurai del vino dell'Etna e del pane di contadini e, timoroso, invitai il senatore a visitare il mio quartierino. Con mio grande sollievo accettò contentissimo. Andai a prenderlo con la mia Balilla, lo trascinai sino a via Peyron che è un po' al diavolo verde. In macchina aveva un po' di paura e nessuna fiducia nella mia perizia di guidatore. "Ti conosco, adesso, Corbèra; se abbiamo la sventura d'incontrare uno dei tuoi sgorbietti in sottana, sarai capace di voltarti e andremo tutti e due a spaccarci il muso contro un cantone." Non incontrammo nessun aborto in gonnella degno di nota e arrivammo intatti.

Per la prima volta da quando lo conoscevo vidi il senatore ridere: fu quando entrammo nella mia camera da letto. "E così, Corbèra, questo è il teatro delle tue lercie avventure." Esaminò i miei pochi libri. "Bene, bene. Sei forse meno ignorante di quel che sembri. Questo qui," aggiunse prendendo in mano il mio Shakespeare, "questo qui qualche cosa la capiva. *'A sea-change into something rich and strange.'*[2] *'What potions have I drunk of Siren tears?'*"[3]

Quando, in salotto, la buona signora Carmagnola entrò portando il vassoio con i ricci, i limoni e il resto, il senatore rimase estatico. "Come? hai pensato a questo? Come fai a sapere che sono la cosa che desidero di più?" "Può mangiarli sicuro, senatore, ancora stamani erano nel mare della Riviera." "Già, già, voialtri siete sempre gli stessi, con le vostre servitù di decadenza, di putrescibilità; sempre con le lunghe orecchie intente a spiare lo strascichio dei passi della Morte. Poveri diavoli! Grazie, Corbèra, sei stato un buon 'famulus'. Peccato che non siano del mare di laggiù, questi ricci, che non siano avvolti nelle nostre alghe; i loro aculei non hanno certo mai fatto versare un sangue divino. Certo hai fatto quanto era possibile, ma questi sono ricci quasi boreali, che sonnecchiavano sulle fredde scogliere di Nervi o di Arenzano." Si vedeva che era uno di quei siciliani per i quali la Riviera Ligure, regione tropicale per i milanesi, è invece una specie d'Islanda. I ricci, spaccati, mostravano le loro carni ferite, sanguigne, stranamente compartimentate. Non vi avevo mai badato prima di adesso, ma dopo i bizzarri paragoni del senatore, essi mi sembravano davvero una sezione fatta in chissà quali delicati organi femminili. Lui li degustava con avidità ma senza allegria, raccolto, quasi compunto. Non volle strizzarvi sopra del limone. "Voialtri, sempre con i vostri sapori accoppiati! Il riccio deve sapere anche di limone, lo zucchero anche di cioccolata, l'amore anche di paradiso!" Quando ebbe finito bevve un sorso di vino, chiuse gli occhi. Dopo un po' mi avvidi che da sotto le palpebre avvizzite gli scivolavano due lagrime. Si alzò, si avvicinò alla finestra, si asciugò guardingo gli occhi. Poi si volse. "Sei stato mai ad Augusta, tu, Corbèra?" Vi ero stato tre mesi da recluta; durante le ore di libera uscita in due o tre si prendeva una barca e si andava in giro nelle acque trasparenti dei golfi. Dopo la mia risposta tacque; poi, con voce irritata: "E in quel golfetto interno, più in su di Punta Izzo, dietro la collina che sovrasta le saline, voi cappelloni siete mai andati?". "Certo; è il più bel posto della Sicilia, per fortuna non ancora scoperto dai dopolavoristi. La costa è selvaggia, è vero, senatore? completamente deserta, non si vede neppure una casa; il mare è del colore dei pavoni; e proprio di fronte, al di là di queste onde cangianti, sale l'Etna; da nessun altro posto è bello come da lì, calmo, possente, davvero divino. È uno di quei luoghi nei quali si vede un aspetto eterno di quell'isola che tanto scioccamente ha volto le spalle alla sua vocazione che era quella di servir da pascolo per gli armenti del Sole."

Il senatore taceva. Poi: "Sei un buon ragazzo, Corbèra; se non fossi tanto ignorante si sarebbe potuto fare

qualcosa di te". Si avvicinò, mi baciò in fronte. "Adesso vai a prendere il tuo macinino. Voglio andare a casa."

Durante le settimane seguenti continuammo a vederci al solito. Adesso facevamo delle passeggiate notturne, in generale giù per via Po e attraverso la militaresca piazza Vittorio, andavamo a guardare il fiume frettoloso e la Collina, là dove essi intercalano un tantino di fantasia nel rigore geometrico della città. Cominciava la primavera, la commovente stagione di gioventù minacciata; nelle sponde spuntavano i primi lillà, le più premurose fra le coppiette senza asilo sfidavano l'umidità dell'erba. "Laggiù il sole brucia di già, le alghe fioriscono; i pesci affiorano a pelo d'acqua nelle notti di luna e s'intravedono guizzi di corpi fra le spume luminose; noi stiamo qui davanti a questa corrente di acqua insipida e deserta, a questi casermoni che sembrano soldati o frati allineati; e udiamo i singhiozzi di questi accoppiamenti di agonizzanti." Lo rallegrava però di pensare alla prossima navigazione fino a Lisbona; la partenza era ormai vicina. "Sarà piacevole; dovresti venire anche tu; peccato però che non sia una comitiva per deficienti in greco; con me si può ancora parlare in italiano, ma se con Zuckmayer o Van der Voos non dimostrassi di conoscere gli ottativi di tutti i verbi irregolari saresti fritto; benché forse della realtà greca sei forse più conscio di loro; non per coltura, certo, ma per istinto animalesco."

Due giorni prima della sua partenza per Genova mi disse che l'indomani non sarebbe venuto al caffè ma che mi aspettava a casa sua alle nove della sera.

Il cerimoniale fu lo stesso dell'altra volta: le immagini degli Dei di tremila anni fa irradiavano gioventù come una stufa irradia calore; la scialba fotografia del giovane dio di cinquanta anni prima sembrava sgomenta nel guardare la propria metamorfosi, canuta e sprofondata in poltrona.

Quando il vino di Cipro fu bevuto il senatore fece venire la Bettina e le disse che poteva andare a letto. "Accompagnerò io stesso il signor Corbèra quando se ne andrà." "Vedi, Corbèra, se ti ho fatto venire qui stasera a rischio di scombinare una tua qualche fornicazione a Rivoli, è perché ho bisogno di te. Parto domani e quando alla mia età si va via non si sa mai se non ci si dovrà trattenere lontani per sempre; specialmente quando si va sul mare. Sai, io, in fondo, ti voglio bene: la tua ingenuità mi commuove, le tue scoperte macchinazioni vitali mi divertono; e poi mi sembra di aver capito che tu, come capita ad alcuni siciliani della specie migliore, sei riuscito a compiere la sintesi di sensi e di ragione. Meriti dunque che io non ti lasci a bocca asciutta, senza averti spiegato la ragione di alcune mie stranezze, di alcune frasi che ho detto davanti a te e che certo ti saranno sembrate degne di un matto." Protestai fiaccamente: "Non ho capito molte delle cose dette da Lei; ma ho sempre attribuito l'incomprensione alla inadeguatezza della mia mente, mai a un'aberrazione della sua". "Lascia stare, Corbèra, tanto fa lo stesso. Tutti noi vecchi sembriamo pazzi a voi giovani e invece è spesso il contrario. Per spiegarmi, però, dovrò raccontarti la mia avventura che è inconsueta. Essa si è svolta quando ero 'quel signorino lì'," e m'indicava la sua fotografia. "Bisogna risalire al 1887, tempo che ti sembrerà preistorico ma che per me non lo è."

Si mosse dal proprio posto dietro la scrivania, venne a sedersi sul mio stesso divano. "Scusa, sai, ma dopo dovrò parlare a voce bassa. Le parole importanti non possono essere berciate; l''urlo di amore' o di odio s'incontra soltanto nei melodrammi o fra la gente più incolta, che sono poi la stessa cosa. Dunque nel 1887 avevo ventiquattro anni; il mio aspetto era quello della fotografia; avevo di già la laurea in lettere antiche, avevo pubblicato due opuscoletti sui dialetti ionici che avevano fatto un certo rumore nella mia Università; e da un anno mi preparavo al concorso per l'Università di Pavia. Inoltre non avevo mai avvicinato una donna. Di donne a dir vero non ne ho mai avvicinato né prima né dopo quell'anno." Ero sicuro che il mio volto fosse rimasto di una marmorea impassibilità, ma m'ingannavo. "È molto villano quel tuo battere di ciglia, Corbèra: ciò che dico è la verità; verità ed anche vanto. Lo so che noi Catanesi passiamo per esser capaci d'ingravidare le nostre balie, e sarà vero. Riguardo a me, no però. Quando si frequentano, notte e giorno, dee e semidee come facevo io in quei tempi, rimane poca voglia di salire le scale dei postriboli di San Berillio. D'altronde, allora, ero anche trattenuto da scrupoli religiosi. Corbèra, dovresti davvero apprendere a controllare le tue ciglia: ti tradiscono continuamente. Scrupoli religiosi, ho detto, sì. Ho anche detto 'allora'. Adesso non ne ho più; ma sotto questo riguardo non mi è servito a nulla.

"Tu, Corbèruccio, che probabilmente hai avuto il tuo posto al giornale in seguito a un bigliettino di qualche gerarca, non sai che cosa sia la preparazione a un concorso per una cattedra universitaria di letteratura greca. Per due anni occorre sgobbare sino al limite della demenza. La lingua, per fortuna, la conoscevo di già abbastanza bene, proprio quanto la conosco adesso; e, sai, non fo per dire... Ma il resto: le varianti alessandrine e bizantine dei testi, i brani citati, sempre male, dagli autori latini, le innumerevoli connessioni della letteratura con la mitologia, la storia, la filosofia, le scienze! C'è da impazzire, ripeto. Studiavo quindi come un cane e inoltre davo lezioni ad alcuni bocciati dal liceo per poter pagarmi l'alloggio in città. Si può dire che mi nutrissi soltanto di olive nere e di caffè. In cima a tutto questo sopravvenne la catastrofe di quell'estate del 1887 che fu una di quelle proprio infernali come ogni tanto se ne passano laggiù. L'Etna la notte rivomitava l'ardore del sole immagazzinato durante le quindici ore del giorno; se a mezzogiorno si toccava una ringhiera di balcone si doveva correre al Pronto Soccorso; i selciati di lava sembravano sul punto di ritornare allo stato fluido; e quasi ogni giorno lo scirocco ti sbatteva in faccia le ali di pipistrello vischioso. Stavo per crepare. Un amico mi salvò: m'incontrò mentre erravo stravolto per le strade balbettando versi greci che non capivo più. Il mio aspetto lo impressionò. 'Senti, Rosario, se continui a restare qui impazzisci e addio concorso. Io me ne vo in Svizzera (quel ragazzo aveva soldi) ma ad Augusta posseggo una casupola di tre

stanze a venti metri dal mare, molto fuori del paese. Fai fagotto, prendi i tuoi libri e vai a starci per tutta l'estate. Passa a casa fra un'ora e ti darò la chiave. Vedrai, lì è un'altra cosa. Alla stazione domanda dov'è il casino Carobene, lo conoscono tutti. Ma parti davvero, parti stasera.'

"Seguii il consiglio, partii la stessa sera, e l'indomani al risveglio, invece delle tubature dei cessi che di là dal cortile mi salutavano all'alba, mi trovai di fronte a una pura distesa di mare, con in fondo l'Etna non più spietato, avvolto nei vapori del mattino. Il posto era completamente deserto, come mi hai detto che lo è ancora adesso, e di una bellezza unica. La casetta nelle sue stanze malandate conteneva in tutto il sofà sul quale avevo passato la notte, un tavolo e tre sedie; in cucina qualche pentola di coccio e un vecchio lume. Dietro la casa un albero di fico e un pozzo. Un paradiso. Andai in paese, rintracciai il contadino della terricciuola di Carobene, convenni con lui che ogni due o tre giorni mi avrebbe portato del pane, della pasta, qualche verdura e del petrolio. L'olio ce lo avevo, di quello nostro che la povera mamma mi aveva mandato a Catania. Presi in affitto una barchetta leggera che il pescatore mi portò nel pomeriggio insieme a una nassa e a qualche amo. Ero deciso a restare lì almeno due mesi.

"Carobene aveva ragione: era davvero un'altra cosa. Il caldo era violento anche ad Augusta ma, non più riverberato da mura, produceva non più una prostrazione bestiale ma una sorta di sommessa euforia, ed il sole, smessa la grinta sua di carnefice, si accontentava di essere un ridente se pur brutale donatore di energie, ed anche un mago che incastonava diamanti mobili in ogni più lieve increspatura del mare. Lo studio aveva cessato di essere una fatica: al dondolio leggero della barca nella quale restavo lunghe ore, ogni libro sembrava non più un ostacolo da superare ma anzi una chiave che mi aprisse il passaggio ad un mondo del quale avevo già sotto gli occhi uno degli aspetti più maliosi. Spesso mi capitava di scandire ad alta voce versi dei poeti e i nomi di quegli Dei dimenticati, ignorati dai più, sfioravano di nuovo la superficie di quel mare che un tempo, al solo udirli, si sollevava in tumulto o placava in bonaccia.

"Il mio isolamento era assoluto, interrotto soltanto dalle visite del contadino che ogni tre o quattro giorni mi portava le poche provviste. Si fermava solo cinque minuti perché a vedermi tanto esaltato e scapigliato doveva certo ritenermi sull'orlo di una pericolosa pazzia. E, a dir vero, il sole, la solitudine, le notti passate sotto il roteare delle stelle, il silenzio, lo scarso nutrimento, lo studio di argomenti remoti, tessevano attorno a me come una incantazione che mi predisponeva al prodigio.

"Questo venne a compiersi la mattina del cinque Agosto, alle sei. Mi ero svegliato da poco ed ero subito salito in barca; pochi colpi di remo mi avevano allontanato dai ciottoli della spiaggia e mi ero fermato sotto un roccione la cui ombra mi avrebbe protetto dal sole che già saliva, gonfio di bella furia, e mutava in oro e azzurro il candore del mare aurorale. Declamavo, quando sentii un brusco abbassamento dell'orlo della barca, a destra, dietro di me, come se qualcheduno vi si fosse aggrappato per salire. Mi voltai e la vidi: il volto liscio di una sedicenne emergeva dal mare, due piccole mani stringevano il fasciame. Quell'adolescente sorrideva, una leggera piega scostava le labbra pallide e lasciava intravedere dentini aguzzi e bianchi, come quelli dei cani. Non era però uno di quei sorrisi come se ne vedono fra voialtri, sempre imbastarditi da un'espressione accessoria, di benevolenza o d'ironia, di pietà, crudeltà o quel che sia; esso esprimeva soltanto se stesso, cioè una quasi bestiale gioia di esistere, una quasi divina letizia. Questo sorriso fu il primo dei sortilegi che agisse su di me rivelandomi paradisi di dimenticate serenità. Dai disordinati capelli color di sole l'acqua del mare colava sugli occhi verdi apertissimi, sui lineamenti d'infantile purezza.

"La nostra ombrosa ragione, per quanto predisposta, s'inalbera dinanzi al prodigio e quando ne avverte uno cerca di appoggiarsi al ricordo di fenomeni banali; come chiunque altro volli credere di aver incontrato una bagnante e, muovendomi con precauzione, mi portai all'altezza di lei, mi curvai, le tesi le mani per farla salire. Ma essa, con stupefacente vigoria emerse diritta dall'acqua sino alla cintola, mi cinse il collo con le braccia, mi avvolse in un profumo mai sentito, si lasciò scivolare nella barca: sotto l'inguine, sotto i glutei il suo corpo era quello di un pesce, rivestito di minutissime squame madreperlacee e azzurre, e terminava in una coda biforcuta che batteva lenta il fondo della barca. Era una Sirena.

"Riversa poggiava la testa sulle mani incrociate, mostrava con tranquilla impudicizia i delicati peluzzi sotto le ascelle, i seni divaricati, il ventre perfetto; da lei saliva quel che ho mal chiamato un profumo, un odore magico di mare, di voluttà giovanissima. Eravamo in ombra ma a venti metri da noi la marina si abbandonava al sole e fremeva di piacere. La mia nudità quasi totale nascondeva male la propria emozione.

"Parlava e così fui sommerso, dopo quello del sorriso e dell'odore, dal terzo, maggiore sortilegio, quello della voce. Essa era un po' gutturale, velata, risuonante di armonici innumerevoli; come sfondo alle parole in essa si avvertivano le risacche impigrite dei mari estivi, il fruscio delle ultime spume sulle spiagge, il passaggio dei venti sulle onde lunari. Il canto delle Sirene, Corbèra, non esiste: la musica cui non si sfugge è quella sola della loro voce.

"Parlava greco e stentavo molto a capirlo. 'Ti sentivo parlare da solo in una lingua simile alla mia; mi piaci, prendimi. Sono Lighea, sono figlia di Calliope. Non credere alle favole inventate su di noi: non uccidiamo nessuno, amiamo soltanto.'

"Curvo su di essa, remavo, fissavo gli occhi ridenti. Giungemmo a riva: presi fra le mie braccia il corpo aromatico, passammo dallo sfolgorio all'ombra densa; lei m'instillava già nella bocca quella voluttà che sta ai vostri baci terrestri come il vino all'acqua sciapa."

Il senatore narrava a bassa voce la sua avventura; io che in cuor mio avevo sempre contrapposto le mie svariate esperienze femminili a quelle di lui ritenute mediocri e che da ciò avevo tratto uno sciocco senso di

diminuita distanza, mi trovavo umiliato: anche in fatto di amori mi vedevo inabissato a distanze invalicabili. Mai un istante ebbi il sospetto che mi si raccontassero delle frottole e chiunque, il più scettico, fosse stato presente, avrebbe avvertito la verità più sicura nel tono del vecchio.

"Così ebbero inizio quelle tre settimane. Non è lecito, non sarebbe d'altronde pietoso verso di te, entrare in particolari. Basti dire che in quegli amplessi godevo insieme della più alta forma di voluttà spirituale e di quella elementare, priva di qualsiasi risonanza sociale, che i nostri pastori solitari provano quando sui monti si uniscono alle loro capre; se il paragone ti ripugna è perché non sei in grado di compiere la trasposizione necessaria dal piano bestiale a quello sovrumano, piani, nel mio caso, sovrapposti.

"Ripensa a quanto Balzac non ha osato esprimere nella *Passion dans le désert.* Dalle membra di lei immortali scaturiva un tale potenziale di vita che le perdite di energia venivano subito compensate, anzi accresciute. In quei giorni, Corbèra, ho amato quanto cento dei vostri Don Giovanni messi insieme per tutta la vita. E che amori! Al riparo di conventi e di delitti, del rancore dei Commendatori e della trivialità dei Leporello, lontani dalle pretese del cuore, dai falsi sospiri, dalle deliquescenze fittizie che inevitabilmente macchiano i vostri miserevoli baci. Un Leporello, a dir vero, ci disturbò il primo giorno, e fu la sola volta: verso le dieci udii il rumore degli scarponi del contadino sul sentiero che portava al mare. Feci appena a tempo a ricoprire con un lenzuolo il corpo inconsueto di Lighea che egli era già sulla porta: la testa, il collo, le braccia di lei che non erano coperte fecero credere al Leporello che si trattasse di un mio volgare amorazzo e quindi gl'incussero un improvviso rispetto; si fermò ancor meno del solito e andandosene strizzò l'occhio sinistro e col pollice e l'indice della destra, raggomitolati e chiusi, fece l'atto di arricciarsi all'angolo della sua bocca un baffo immaginario; e si arrampicò sul sentiero.

"Ho parlato di venti giorni passati insieme; non vorrei però che tu immaginassi che durante quelle tre settimane essa ed io abbiamo vissuto 'maritalmente', come si dice, avendo in comune letto, cibo e occupazioni. Le assenze di Lighea erano frequentissime: senza farmene cenno prima si tuffava in mare e scompariva, talvolta per moltissime ore. Quando ritornava, quasi sempre di primo mattino, o m'incontrava in barca o, se ero ancora nella casupola, strisciava sui ciottoli metà fuori e metà dentro l'acqua, sul dorso, facendo forza con le braccia e chiamandomi per esser aiutata a salire la china. 'Sasà,' mi chiamava, poiché le avevo detto che questo era il diminutivo del mio nome. In questo atto, impacciata proprio da quella parte del corpo suo che le conferiva scioltezza nel mare, essa presentava l'aspetto compassionevole di un animale ferito, aspetto che il riso dei suoi occhi cancellava subito.

"Essa non mangiava che roba viva: spesso la vedevo emergere dal mare, il torso delicato luccicante al sole, mentre straziava coi denti un pesce argentato che fremeva ancora; il sangue le rigava il mento e dopo qualche morso il merluzzo o l'orata maciullata venivano ributtati dietro le sue spalle e, maculandola di rosso, affondavano nell'acqua mentre essa infantilmente gridava nettandosi i denti con la lingua. Una volta le diedi del vino; dal bicchiere le fu impossibile bere, dovetti versargliene nella palma minuscola ed appena appena verdina, ed essa lo bevette facendo schioccare la lingua come fa un cane mentre negli occhi le si dipingeva la sorpresa per quel sapore ignoto. Disse che era buono, ma, dopo, lo rifiutò sempre. Di quando in quando veniva a riva con le mani piene di ostriche, di cozze, e mentre io faticavo ad aprirne i gusci con un coltello, lei li schiacciava con una pietra e succhiava il mollusco palpitante, insieme a briciole di conchiglia delle quali non si curava.

"Te l'ho già detto, Corbèra: era una bestia ma nel medesimo istante era anche una Immortale ed è peccato che parlando non si possa continuamente esprimere questa sintesi come, con assoluta semplicità, essa la esprimeva nel proprio corpo. Non soltanto nell'atto carnale essa manifestava una giocondità e una delicatezza opposte alla tetra foia animale ma il suo parlare era di una immediatezza potente che ho ritrovato soltanto in pochi grandi poeti. Non si è figlia di Calliope per niente: all'oscuro di tutte le colture, ignara di ogni saggezza, sdegnosa di qualsiasi costrizione morale, essa faceva parte, tuttavia, della sorgiva di ogni coltura, di ogni sapienza, di ogni etica e sapeva esprimere questa sua primigenia superiorità in termini di scabra bellezza. 'Sono tutto perché sono soltanto corrente di vita priva di accidenti; sono immortale perché tutte le morti confluiscono in me da quella del merluzzo di dianzi a quella di Zeus, e in me radunate ridiventano vita non più individuale e determinata ma pànica e quindi libera.' Poi diceva: 'Tu sei bello e giovane; dovresti seguirmi adesso nel mare e scamperesti ai dolori, alla vecchiaia; verresti nella mia dimora, sotto gli altissimi monti di acque immote e oscure, dove tutto è silenziosa quiete tanto connaturata che chi la possiede non la avverte neppure. Io ti ho amato e, ricordalo, quando sarai stanco, quando non ne potrai proprio più, non avrai che da sporgerti sul mare e chiamarmi: io sarò sempre lì, perché sono ovunque, e il tuo sogno di sonno sarà realizzato'.

"Mi narrava della sua esistenza sotto il mare, dei Tritoni barbuti, delle glauche spelonche, ma mi diceva che anche queste erano fatue apparenze e che la verità era ben più in fondo, nel cieco muto palazzo di acque informi, eterne, senza bagliori, senza sussurri.

"Una volta mi disse che sarebbe stata assente a lungo, sino alla sera del giorno seguente. 'Debbo andare lontano, là dove so che troverò un dono per te.'

"Ritornò infatti con uno stupendo ramo di corallo purpureo incrostato di conchiglie e muffe marine. L'ho conservato a lungo in un cassetto ed ogni sera baciavo quei posti sui quali ricordavo che si erano posate le dita della Indifferente cioè della Benefica. Un giorno poi la Maria, quella governante mia che ha preceduto la Bettina, lo ha rubato per darlo a un suo magnaccia. L'ho ritrovato poi da un gioielliere di Ponte Vecchio,

sconsacrato, ripulito e lisciato al punto di essere quasi irriconoscibile. Lo ho ricomprato e di notte lo ho buttato in Arno: era passato per troppe mani profane.

"Mi parlava anche dei non pochi amanti umani che essa aveva avuto durante la sua adolescenza millenaria: pescatori e marinai greci, siciliani, arabi, capresi, alcuni naufraghi anche, alla deriva su rottami fradici cui essa era apparsa un attimo nel lampeggiare della burrasca per mutare in piacere il loro ultimo rantolo. 'Tutti hanno seguito il mio invito, sono venuti a ritrovarmi, alcuni subito, altri trascorso ciò che per loro era molto tempo. Uno solo non si è fatto più vedere; era un bel ragazzone con pelle bianchissima e con capelli rossi col quale mi sono unita su di una spiaggia lontana là dove il nostro mare si versa nel grande Oceano; odorava di qualche cosa di più forte di quel vino che mi hai dato l'altro giorno. Credo che non si sia fatto vedere non certo perché felice ma perché quando c'incontrammo era talmente ubriaco da non capir più nulla; gli sarò sembrata una delle solite pescatrici.'

"Quelle settimane di grande estate trascorsero rapide come un solo mattino; quando furono passate mi accorsi che in realtà avevo vissuto dei secoli. Quella ragazzina lasciva, quella belvetta crudele era stata anche Madre saggissima che con la sola presenza aveva sradicato fedi, dissipato metafisiche; con le dita fragili, spesso insanguinate, mi aveva mostrato la via verso i veri eterni riposi, anche verso un ascetismo di vita derivato non dalla rinunzia ma dalla impossibilità di accettare altri piaceri inferiori. Non io certo sarò il secondo a non ubbidire al suo richiamo, non rifiuterò questa specie di Grazia pagana che mi è stata concessa.

"In ragione della sua violenza stessa, quell'estate fu breve. Un po' dopo il venti Agosto si riunirono le prime timide nuvole, piovve qualche goccia isolata tiepida come sangue. Le notti fu tutto un concatenarsi, sul lontano orizzonte, di lenti, muti lampeggiamenti che si deducevano l'uno dall'altro come le cogitazioni di un dio. Al mattino il mare color di tortora come una tortora si doleva per sue arcane irrequietudini ed alla sera s'increspava, senza che si percepisse brezza, in un digradare di grigi-fumo, grigi-acciaio, grigi-perla, soavissimi tutti e più affettuosi dello splendore di prima. Lontanissimi brandelli di nebbia sfioravano le acque: forse sulle coste greche pioveva di già. Anche l'umore di Lighea trascolorava dallo splendore all'affettuosità del grigio. Taceva di più, passava ore distesa su uno scoglio a guardare l'orizzonte non più immobile, si allontanava poco. 'Voglio restare ancora con te; se adesso andassi al largo i miei compagni del mare mi tratterrebbero. Li senti? Mi chiamano.' Talvolta mi sembrava davvero di udire una nota differente, più bassa fra lo squittio acuto dei gabbiani, intravedere scapigliamenti fulminei fra scoglio e scoglio. 'Suonano le loro conche, chiamano Lighea per le feste della bufera.'

"Questa ci assalì all'alba del giorno ventisei. Dallo scoglio vedemmo l'avvicinarsi del vento che sconvolgeva le acque lontane, vicino a noi i flutti plumbei si rigonfiavano vasti e pigri. Presto la raffica ci raggiunse, fischiò nelle orecchie, piegò i rosmarini disseccati. Il mare al di sotto di noi si ruppe, la prima ondata avanzò coperta di biancore. 'Addio, Sasà. Non dimenticherai.' Il cavallone si spezzò sullo scoglio, la Sirena si buttò nello zampillare iridato; non la vidi ricadere; sembrò che si disfacesse nella spuma."

Il senatore partì l'indomani mattina; io andai alla stazione per salutarlo. Era scontroso e tagliente come sempre, ma quando il treno incominciò a muoversi, dal finestrino le sue dita sfiorarono la mia testa.

Il giorno dopo, all'alba, si telefonò da Genova al giornale: durante la notte il senatore La Ciura era caduto in mare dalla coperta del *Rex* che navigava verso Napoli, e benché delle scialuppe fossero state immediatamente messe in mare, il corpo non era stato ritrovato.

Una settimana più tardi venne aperto il testamento di lui: alla Bettina andavano i soldi in banca e il mobilio; la biblioteca veniva ereditata dall'Università di Catania; in un codicillo di recente data io ero nominato quale legatario del cratere greco con le figure delle Sirene e della grande fotografia della "Core" dell'Acropoli.

I due oggetti furono inviati da me alla mia casa di Palermo. Poi venne la guerra e mentre io me ne stavo in Marmarica con mezzo litro di acqua al giorno i "Liberators" distrussero la mia casa: quando ritornai la fotografia era stata tagliata a striscioline che erano servite come torce ai saccheggiatori notturni; il cratere era stato fatto a pezzi; nel frammento più grosso si vedono i piedi di Ulisse legato all'albero della nave. Lo conservo ancora. I libri furono depositati nel sottosuolo dell'Università ma poiché mancano i fondi per le scaffalature essi vanno imputridendo lentamente.

[1] Inizio del testo registrato. [*N.d.R.*]

[2] Shakespeare, *The Tempest,* I, 1, 394. [*N.d.R.*]

[3] Shakespeare, *The Sonnets,* 119, 1, 394. [*N.d.R.*]

Nota del curatore

La presente edizione de *La sirena* è stata condotta sulle seguenti fonti.

Dattiloscritto del racconto redatto da Olga Wolff Stomersee, sorella minore di Alessandra Wolff Stomersee e moglie dell'ambasciatore Augusto Biancheri. Le madrilingue delle sorelle Wolff erano il russo (avevano studiato a San Pietroburgo), il tedesco, lingua dell'aristocrazia baltica, e il francese, lingua della diplomazia. Avevano un'ottima conoscenza anche dell'inglese e dell'italiano. Olga, dopo il matrimonio con Augusto Biancheri, si iscrisse alla facoltà di Lettere e dovette apprendere il greco antico, estraneo alla sua originaria formazione culturale. Aveva quindi una conoscenza dell'italiano a livello universitario. Ritengo che per questo motivo la sorella le avesse affidato il compito di trascrivere i manoscritti dei racconti lasciati dal cognato. Questo dattiloscritto è stato ritrovato dopo l'ultima edizione de *I racconti*, a cura di Nicoletta Polo, apparsa presso Feltrinelli nel 1988. Il manoscritto de *La sirena* non è mai stato ritrovato.

Edizione de *I racconti* nella collana "Biblioteca di letteratura", giugno 1961.

Edizione de *I racconti* nella collana "Impronte", a cura di Nicoletta Polo, novembre 1988.

Registrazione (incompleta) de *La sirena* da parte dell'autore, febbraio 1957.

Il ritrovamento del dattiloscritto ha permesso di rettificare vari passi. Uno da considerare specialmente importante.

Dattiloscritto: "il mare: il mare di Sicilia è il più colorito, il più aromatico…".

Edizione a stampa: "il mare: il mare di Sicilia è il più colorito, il più romantico". Questa dizione toccava una mia corda sensibile. Quando i miei studenti svogliati adopravano "romantico" come l'unica connotazione positiva di un'opera musicale, a me veniva voglia di canticchiare come Renato Rascel: "*Tu sei romantica, amica delle nuvole*".

Una dozzina di altri interventi contribuiscono indubbiamente a una maggiore chiarezza del testo. Altri interventi rettificano la grafia unificando i criteri editoriali.

In caso di concordanza fra dattiloscritto e registrazione la versione è data per sicura.

In caso di discrepanza prevale il dattiloscritto. E la divergenza viene interpretata come variante estemporanea nel corso della lettura.

G.L.T.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa duca di Palma e principe di Lampedusa, nato nel 1896 e morto nel 1957, si formò su scritti illuministici e raccolte di relazioni militari. Divenne narratore solo nella seconda parte della sua vita, privo di contatti con gli ambienti letterari. Compose un solo romanzo, *Il Gattopardo*, che, rifiutato da due grandi case editrici, fu pubblicato da Feltrinelli nel 1958 su interessamento di Giorgio Bassani, ed ebbe un immediato, grandissimo consenso di pubblico e critica (disponibile anche in audiolibro “Emons Feltrinelli”, 2012). Feltrinelli ha pubblicato anche *I racconti* (1961), *Opere* (1965), *Invito alle Lettere francesi del Cinquecento* (1979), *La sirena* (2014; con cd).

Cos’è ZOOM?

Zoom è la nuova collana di Feltrinelli tutta digitale.
Una nuova idea di libro: economico, veloce e maneggevole.

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Libri piccoli solo per le loro dimensioni e il loro prezzo. Libri che sanno rimanere nella mente a lungo, come una bella canzone, e che come una canzone possono essere scelti e gustati uno alla volta. E poi gustati di nuovo, e di nuovo...

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De Luca Erri, *Il turno di notte lo fanno le stelle*
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A cura di Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi

© Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore Milano

Prima edizione nella collana “Varia” febbraio 2014
Prima edizione nella collana “Feltrinelli ZOOM” marzo 2014

ISBN: 9788858852217

Tratto da *La sirena* pubblicato da Feltrinelli.

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